



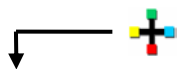
Witnessing To Jesus Christ

1956

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

In *Presenting Christ To India Today* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1956). A Sermon Preached At The Synod Service On The 12th January, 1956 By The Deputy Moderator, The Bishop In Madurai-Rantnad, The Rt. Rev. J. E. Lesslie Newbigin. Other items in the book: "The India We Live In" By The Rev. Paul D. Devanandan; "The Christian Message In The Indian Setting" By The Rev. A. E. Inbanathan; "Messengers Of Christ Today" By The Rt. Rev. A. J. Appasamy.

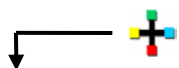
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But when the Counsellor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning. John 15: 26-27.

Witness to Jesus Christ is portrayed in the New Testament primarily as a fact which will necessarily follow the coming of the Holy Spirit, rather than as an obligation resting upon the Christian conscience. 'You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you ; and you shall be my witnesses,' says the risen Lord to His disciples ; and in the book of Acts we read that the Holy Spirit bore witness by signs and wonders wrought through the apostles. The work of witness is primarily the work of the Spirit Himself, and only secondarily is it our work. We have an obligation not to hinder that witness, an obligation to let the light that is kindled in us shine before men. It is as if witness was something which happens to the Christian if he does not prevent it, just as a – branch which abides in the vine bears fruit naturally if something does not prevent it. I do not think that we find in the New Testament the kind of fervent appeals for evangelistic effort with which we are familiar in our Church life. It is rather that the Christian life is itself life in that Spirit who is Himself Christ's witness, and that therefore the Christian life is itself in its very nature a life of witness.

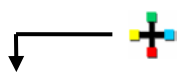
Let us look into this more closely. St John, when he speaks of the glory of Christ, says that it was glory as of an



only Son from a Father. The whole character of God's revelation in Jesus is summed up in sonship. All His words and works are the words and works of the Father which the Son does because they are His Father's words and works. His whole life is simply obedience to the Father, and therefore to see Him— is to see the Father. His glory is not something in Himself: it is His obedience to the Father and the Father's love for Him. It exists in the relation between the Son and the Father.

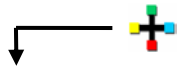
So also the life of the disciples is in their relationship with the Son. He makes this clear to them when He says 'As the Father has sent me, so send I you ;' and when He tells them that they are to abide in Him as He abides in the Father, that they are to obey Him as He obeys the Father, that as the Father loves Him so He loves them. In other words, just as the whole glory of Christ consists not, in Himself but in his relation to the Father, so the whole glory of the Church consists not in itself but in its relation to Christ. And it is in this context of obedience to Christ and abiding in Christ that the Holy Spirit is given. 'If you love me you will keep my commandments and I will pray the Father and He will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever even the Spirit of Truth.' This is the Spirit who is the witness. The Spirit who makes it possible for us to abide in Christ is Himself the witness to Christ. The life which the Spirit produces in us is a life which refers all the time to Christ, just as His life referred all the time to the Father. It is a life which has no glory and indeed no meaning in itself, but only a glory and meaning in its relation to Christ a relation of obedience and gratitude which points all the time to Him.

I have come to feel that this is a matter of great importance in our task of presenting Christ to India today. I don't think that what is needed is a stirring summons to evangelistic effort in the traditionally understood sense of the term. Most of our Churches are doing a good deal of preaching to non-Christians, though we may sometimes be



doubtful about whether the preaching is really making contact with the minds and hearts of the hearers. But what challenges us in the India of today is the rise of individuals and groups who have taken large parts of the ethical teaching of Jesus far more seriously than we have, and who put to us, in a way that we cannot evade, the question 'what have you got that we do not have?' So long as we stand at a safe distance we can certainly protect ourselves from that challenge with sound theological arguments. We can point out the lack of a real metaphysical basis for their ethics. We can point out that their picture of Jesus is distorted, that He made a claim which they steadily reject. But somehow when we come really close – and we cannot bear witness unless we do come close – that question seems to go right through our theological defences: What do you have that we do not have? Am I quite wrong if I say that we Christians of India have not so far dared to give a plain answer to that question to our Gandhian friends at close quarters?

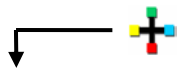
I think the only answer is one that we cannot directly give: it is the answer which the Holy Spirit Himself must give, a witness to Christ which He Himself will give in the hearts and consciences of non-Christian friends in and through our life in the Spirit. The deep and fundamental difference between this life in the Holy Spirit and the life of the kind of non-Christian communities that I am thinking of is surely this: that life is one in which holiness, righteousness, purity are to be found in men, in ourselves; the life in the Spirit is one in which holiness, righteousness, purity are in Christ alone, and our position is simply that of forgiven and grateful sinners. It is thus a life which is itself witness, which has nothing in itself, which draws men not to itself but to Christ.. I am sure that this makes an enormous practical difference. The one kind of life must lead to an ever-increasing sense of strain under the intolerable burden of being the guardians and examplars of holiness; the other is a life of freedom, a life not under law but under grace, a life in which love is not a duty or a programme, but the overflow of a forgiven heart.



But this means that it is a life which is all the time referred to Christ and His atoning act, Because He had died for me, I am absolutely free – free to be at the service of my brother in whatever way he needs me. The operative, controlling fact all the time is this:– He died for me. Without that there is nothing. At every moment, in every word and deed, this life is the product of that act.

If this is true, if it is true that the real witness is the Spirit Himself pointing always to Christ, and that we are ourselves only witnesses in a secondary sense as being caught up into the Spirit's life, then the primary need for our Churches if we are to present Christ to India to-day is the recovery of the fulness of life in the Spirit. But do we really believe this? Do we, do those of our members; who are taking the Gospel seriously, live under grace or under law? Do our Churches understand that Church life is nothing but life in the Spirit? Or do we leave that entirely to the Pentecostals? Very deliberately I would say that the first requirement for presenting Christ to India to-day is not a new programme of evangelism (though we need that), and not even a new theological clarity (though God knows we need that); but a rediscovery of the truth that Church life is life in the Spirit. That rediscovery will mean that both in word and in deed we point away from ourselves to Him, that we make no claim for ourselves, but a total claim for Him.

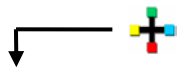
Will you allow me to share with you a small experience which has come my way in the past few days? I have been very much concerned about the large number of our Christian teachers who are going through Government and other non-Christian Basic Training Schools. In most cases the effect upon them is that their Christian witness is totally silenced. Without protest they allow themselves to be persuaded to attend daily worship in which Christ is reduced to the level of one among the alleged revelations of God. Whatever mental reservations they have at the beginning are flattened out by the daily repetition of the same experience for weeks and months, and when they return to their school they see



little reason for preaching the Gospel, for studying the Bible, or for teaching the Faith to the children. I have been concerned – as I hope we have all been – by the question: If even our teachers do not know how to give a clear Christian witness in a Basic Training School today, how will our ordinary members give any witness at all in the villages which will be their product tomorrow?

During this last weekend I came across one small proof that God has the answer to that question. In a Government Basic Training School where a group of Christian teachers were (along with others) being re-trained, one alone had the courage to request and obtain permission to absent himself from the daily syncretistic worship. That required courage for a young elementary grade village teacher, and it made him in some degree a marked man. But a more difficult test followed. In that school (as, I fear, in many others) it was the universal custom, privately admitted by all, to falsify returns by buying yarn in the bazaar to supplement the amount actually spun by the students, the minimum required by the syllabus being more than any student can do in the time. This young teacher refused to conform. He was scoffed at for a fool even by his fellow-Christians, and assured that he would be failed. He answered: 'If I fail, I fail, but my duty is to be true to God.' In the event he was the only student who failed to turn in the minimum amount of yarn required for a pass. But his witness had not been without effect. I found that this simple piece of faithfulness had produced a profound effect in the institution, which was full of petty dishonesty. At the closing assembly the Head of the Institution, in the presence of the staff and student body, said: 'This student has turned in less than the amount of yarn required for a pass; but I have been watching him, and I tell you that lie is the only student who has turned in an

honest account, and I am going to pass him. He seems to be a real Christian.' One small piece of explicit fidelity to Christ at personal cost produced a most profound and searching challenge to the whole institution. What the wise and prudent struggle to



achieve, God quietly accomplishes through His babes and sucklings. It is the Holy Spirit who is the true witness to Christ, convicting the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgment. Our witness is secondary. Our first business is to confess Him, to obey Him, to love Him, to abide in Him. The branch that abides in Him bears fruit.

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