



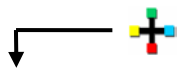
## Church as Witness: A Meditation

1978

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

*Reformed World* 35, (March): 5-9.

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.



*When the disciples had come together, they asked Jesus, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth".(Acts 1:6-8).*

The disciples' question was a reasonable one. The original 'good news' had been that the kingdom of God was at hand. The good news had become very bad news indeed; the whole affair seemed to have ended in total humiliation and disaster. But now they knew that it was not so; they knew that Jesus was vindicated. And so they come back to the original good news. Must they not again say with complete assurance: "The kingdom of God is at hand?" Can there be any more delay?

The answer has a twofold character; it is both a warning and a promise. It is a warning that the kingdom is God's alone, and a promise that they will receive such a foretaste of the kingdom as will constitute them witnesses of the reality of that kingdom.

It is first of all a warning. The mission on which they are to be sent is not one over which they have any sort of control. It is completely in God's hands. He alone knows and determines the possibilities of human history. He alone brings it to its proper end. The disciples do not have any knowledge or ability which is denied to other people in respect of the possibilities and limits of history. They are only witnesses, nothing more.

But – secondly – Jesus' answer is a promise. "You *shall* be my witnesses". It is a promise – not a command. It is the promise of a gift, an action of pure grace, by which they will be constituted witnesses. It is not a new law which they must labour to fulfill and about which they will always carry the terrible burden of guilt because they have not fulfilled it. It is the promise of a gift by which they will become the witnesses of the presence of the kingdom in Jesus.



This promised gift is the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is the gift which Paul described as the 'firstfruit' (Romans 8:23) or the 'guarantee' (*arabon*) (II Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:12) of that which is to come. Both of these words speak of something which is the first installment of a much bigger thing to come. It is the cash on deposit which assures us that the full amount will surely be paid. It is the firstfruit which assures us that there is going to be a harvest. As such it has a double character. It is more than a mere verbal promise. It is more than a 'pro note', more than an 'I.O.U.'. It is real cash, real fruit; something that can be enjoyed now. But it is more than this. It carries with it much more than what it is in itself; it carries with it the assurance of something very much greater which is on the way.

The Holy Spirit, given to the company of the disciples, is the firstfruit, the foretaste, the cash-on-account which assures us of the fact that the kingdom of God is a reality and that it is the coming reality. In the presence of the Holy Spirit we have already a real foretaste of life in the kingdom of God, of the love, joy, peace and understanding which belong to God's kingdom. Real, but yet only a foretaste; something – therefore – which points beyond itself to that which is yet to come. Just as the first-fruit is more than just one handful of grain or one bunch of fruit, but has the character of a sign pointing us to the coming harvest and assuring us of its coming; and just as the cash-on-account is more than just a sum of money, but has the character of a sign assuring us of the fact that the full amount will be paid; so the presence of the Holy Spirit is more than just the present experience of life in the fellowship of the Church, but is the assurance of something much richer and more glorious to come. It is in this sense that the presence of the Holy Spirit constitutes the Church a witness to the kingdom which it proclaims.

In a tropical country where the midday hours are too hot for walking in comfort, it is normal to start a journey before dawn. One has often the experience of setting out in the darkness and walking in a westerly direction so that neither the sky nor the earth shows any sign of light and one has nothing but the lantern carried in the hand to warn of dangers in the path. But it may happen that after some time one meets a company of people coming in the opposite direction, and one notices a light in their faces. If one stops them to ask for the explanation, it is easily given. "Turn round (be converted!) and look the other way. You will see that light is



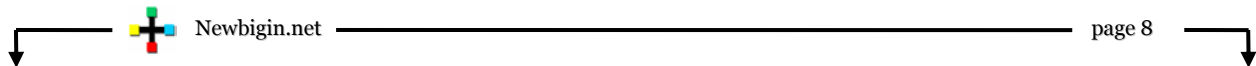
beginning to glow in the eastern sky. What you saw was just the reflection of that light in our faces". That is surely a valid parable of what is said in this passage about witness. The disciples will be witnesses, not because of their own efforts, but because they will reflect in their own life the reality of the coming kingdom of which they will receive the foretaste in the gift of the Spirit.

As I listen to discussions in the churches about mission and evangelism I am constantly struck by the fact that these discussions are so often conducted as though mission were part of the law rather than part of the Gospel. Mission is seen as a 'task' – a task which we are failing to perform, and about which we therefore have a guilty conscience. There is an atmosphere of anxiety about these discussions, fortified – in England at least – by well publicized statistics about declining church membership. One gets the impression that the Church is one 'good cause' among others, one which depends on our efforts, and about which we can be either optimistic or else – more probably – pessimistic. In any case mission is a task, a burden to be carried.

All this is very remote from the New Testament. I cannot find in any of Paul's letters a single word which lays on the churches the 'task' of evangelism. There is never anything remotely resembling a 'pep talk' about their duty to be more vigorous in their efforts to spread the Gospel. The emphasis all the time is upon faithfulness to Christ. That is what is required, and by that standard we shall all be judged at the last day. But the final outcome, the triumph of God's reign, is not in the hands of the Church. It is entirely in God's hands. On that subject optimism

and pessimism would be equally irrelevant. What matters is that they should remain to the end faithful stewards of what has been entrusted to them.

The fact that mission is a gift rather than a task, that it belongs to the Gospel rather than to the Law, is also repeatedly brought out in the Gospel. Witness is primarily the work of the Spirit himself; the role of the Church is secondary. "When the Paraclete comes ... he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses because you have been with me from the beginning" (Jn. 15:26f). It is the Spirit who will convict the world. (Jn. 16:8ff). The Spirit is the advocate who stands in court to speak for the Christian under trial. He is not to worry about his defence, for there is one who is fully able to undertake this duty. "Do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say ... for it is not you who speak, but



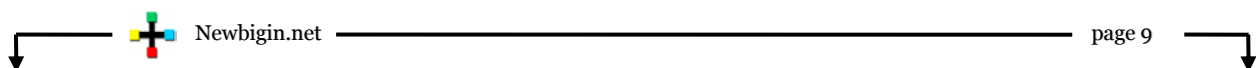
the Holy Spirit (Mk. 13:11). This promise is made to the Church precisely for the situations when it has every reason for 'pessimism' – when it is at its weakest and most defenceless. Once again, the one thing that matters is to be faithful. The active agent in mission is the Spirit himself.

### **The Whole Fellowship**

The Spirit is given to the whole fellowship. It is as members in the one body that individuals receive their particular gifts. It is not these particular gifts which are the effective instruments of witness: it is the total witness which the Spirit gives through the harmonious exercise of all the gifts by the members acting as members one of another. Not all members have the gift of evangelism. The gift by which a man or a woman is able to communicate personally the good news about Jesus in a way that 'comes alive' in the mind of another person is a very precious gift. It is not given to all. There are others who have other gifts – gifts of healing, of discernment ("prophecy"), of administration, of loving service. When these different gifts are exercised in mutual subordination and loyalty, they become together the instruments through which the Spirit does his own work of bringing men and women to new birth through faith in Jesus.

I have listened to the testimonies of scores of men and women who have come to faith in Jesus from another faith or no faith. What has struck me in listening to these testimonies is that there is no single way by which people are converted; but there is almost always not one but a whole series of experiences which have prepared the way for the decisive experience that brought about conversion; that in very many cases the person who spoke the word or did the deed that helped to bring about a change of direction in another life did not know that his word or deed had this effect; and that one has always to conclude in the end that it was the work of the Spirit himself, and not of any person, or technique, or programme, that brought about conversion. I could illustrate this from many concrete experiences.

When those who are gifted in different ways imagine that it is their special gifts, their 'methods', their 'priorities' which determine the 'success' or otherwise of the Church's mission, then there is a senseless rivalry among the members which Paul ridicules in



I Corinthians 12. But when all the members, recognizing their need of the service of those who have different gifts, acknowledge one another and rejoice in the different gifts that others have received, then all the different actions – whether of evangelism or of healing or of prophecy or of service – are seen to be the signs of the working of the one Spirit, and all together serve his purpose.

During most of my service as a missionary I have been part of a team which included the direct preaching of the Gospel both in the Church and out in the streets, teaching in schools and colleges, medical work, industrial and rural mission, efforts to improve the local agriculture and to cope with the flood and famine and many other forms of ministry. Along with these there was a

formal and informal discussion with men and women of other faiths and ideologies. If these different kinds of activity were conducted in competition with each other, or even in mutual disparagement, to that extent they lost their value as evidences of the presence of the one Spirit. But when they were carried on in mutual trust and loyalty they served to reinforce one another in a multitude of ways. The works of kindness in hospital gave veracity to words spoken by the preacher. The preacher's message gave a cutting edge to the questions raised in industry. The rooting of all these activities in the life of a worshipping congregation centred in the word and sacraments of the Gospel gave them the character of signs pointing beyond themselves to that to which the Church bears witness in its worship. And so, by ways which no one could ever fully trace, the Spirit would lead men and women to that moment of disclosure when they 'saw' that the hidden reality behind all these things was the present in foretaste of the kingdom and power and glory of God.

The word "You shall be my witnesses" is not a command to be obeyed but a promise to be trusted. What is required is that we should live together, faithful to that promise. The Church which does so will find that the promise is kept.

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.