2. Witness in a Biblical Perspective

LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

What follows is a brief response to the questions raised in the letter of Dr F.J. Verstraelen dated 19th March 1986, with reference to the paper of Prof. M.R. Spindler entitled: 'Visa for Witness'.

It seems to me that the divorce between biblical scholarship and missiology is only part of a much wider problem which affects the way in which the Bible functions (or is not allowed to function) in the life of the Church.

When the International Missionary Council (of which I was then General Secretary) asked Johannes Blauw to write a book on the biblical concept of mission, as one part of a wider study programme, we were still living in the age of the so-called 'Biblical Theology'. It was the age which produced many books with such titles as: 'The Biblical Doctrine of the State', 'The Biblical Doctrine of Work', 'The Biblical Doctrine of Marriage' etc. That era ended when the consensus on 'biblical theology' was shattered. Its demise was (as far as the ecumenical movement was concerned) most dramatically signalled in the address of Professor Ernst Küsemann to the Montreal Faith & Order Conference in 1964, which insisted that the Bible does not have one teaching about anything but only a mixture of conflicting doctrines which it is the business of the biblical scholar to disentangle.

Since then biblical scholarship (at least as perceived by a non-expert) has worked in an area remote from the issues which Christians have to face in the worlds of ethics, politics, churchmanship and - of course - missions.

But the distinction between the two ways of studying scripture is not (as Prof. Spindler's paper suggests) between a 'scholarly, uncommitted approach' and the approach which is committed to the gospel mission. The distinction is not between commitment and non-commitment. It is between two different commitments. The 'scholarly' approach, like every intellectual activity, relies upon a whole framework of belief about the nature of reality and the conditions of knowledge. They are the beliefs which rule the world of the secular university and which are normally taken for granted. The scholar who imagines that he is 'uncommitted' is merely blind to his own commitments. The scholar who approaches the Bible with a commitment to the belief that Jesus is God incarnate, the one in whom all things hold together and in whom all things are to be finally summed up, is in a no more vulnerable position than the scholar who approaches the Bible with the belief that the ultimate nature of things is to be discovered by adopting the standpoint and methods of contemporary science. And of the two alternative commitments, perhaps the former is more likely to lead to understanding, since it is also the commitment of the biblical writers.

This point has a special relevance in considering the question of witness. 'Witness' is primarily a term from the law-court. It refers to one who is taking part in a trial of
which the outcome has not yet been announced. Basic to the modern scientific method is the belief that the way to arrive at the truth is the way of observation and induction from observable facts. The biblical concept of witness belongs to a different world-view, one in which we acknowledge that in respect of ultimate truth we may be witnesses but we do not have in our hands the text of the final judgment.

I turn now to the biblical evidence. Obviously, the word 'witness' is used on many occasions in a non-specialist sense, that is to say to refer to occasions when witness is borne - true or false - in the course of normal relations between people, but where there is no reference to Christ, to the Gospel or to the Church. Omitting such non-specialist uses, I have assembled in what follows all the texts of the New Testament where the words *martys*, *martynia*, *martyon* and *martys* occur, and also the single case of *amartyros* in Acts 14.17. This Greek root is represented in the English versions by a variety of words - witness, testimony, record. I have also included a few texts, marked (x), where these words do not occur but where the reality to which these words refer is distinctly present. Although no doubt the references in Isaiah 43 and 44 to Israel as Yahweh's witness are in the background of the New Testament language, I have not considered these in detail.

The NT evidence may be set out as follows.

1. Jesus himself bears witness.
   
   (a) In the trial before the Sanhedrin many false witnesses speak. Finally the High Priest puts the direct question to Jesus and Jesus answers in words which in effect bear witness of who he is: Mark 14.62 & parallels (x).
   
   (b) In the trial before Pilate (according to John) Jesus says that he has come into the world 'to bear witness to the truth' (Jn 18.37). This is reflected in I Tim 6.13 - 'Jesus Christ who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession'.
   
   (c) In his long argument with the Jews in which Jesus is mainly concerned to point to other witnesses, he nevertheless says: 'Even if I do bear witness to myself, my witness is true' (Jn 8.14).

   But Jesus does not need to bear witness to himself, for there are other witnesses.

2. Moses, David and the Prophets bear witness to Jesus.
   
   'You search the scriptures ... it is they that bear witness to me' (Jn 5.39)
   
   David bears witness to Jesus (Acts 2.25-31) (x)
   
   'To him all the prophets bear witness' (Acts 10.43)
   
   'The law and the prophets bear witness ...' (Rom 3.21)
   
   'Moses was faithful ... to testify ...' (Heb 3.5)
   
   The testimony of Melchizedek (Heb 7.8)
   
   The testimony of the Holy Spirit in Jeremiah (Heb 10.15)
   
   The cloud of witnesses (Heb 12.1).

3. John the Baptist bears witness to Jesus.
   
   'He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe in him (Jesus) (Jn 1.7-8)
   
   The testimony of John (Jn 1.19-23)
   
   'John bore witness, "I saw the Spirit descend ..."' (Jn 1.32)
   
   'I have seen and borne witness that this is the Son of God' (Jn 1.34)
   
   'He ... to whom you bore witness' (Jn 3.26).