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## The True Nature of New Testament Christianity

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

*First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, May-June 1963, Vol. 41-3.*

In what we are now, by the Lord's help, essaying to set forth, we are making a bold and honest attempt to uncover the true nature of New Testament Christianity. It is in the way of spiritual excavation, to lay bare the essential foundation and character of that which took its rise from the ascension and heavenly session of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It would be an over-bold person who, at this time of day, thought that anything that he could do would seriously change or affect the face of Christianity as it now exists, and no such illusion or delusion prompts these pages. But, having travelled far and wide over the world for many years, and having come into contact with Christians of very many connections and complexions, the writer has found a great amount of unrest, perplexity, dissatisfaction, and disappointment among them. Many older Christians are feeling that things are not as they should be, while the younger generation is in a state nearing revolt. It is felt - and there are few who will disagree - that Christianity in general, with some few notable exceptions, is failing to register any impact upon world-conditions, or is no longer something to be taken serious account of.

What we are about to offer, then, is for the troubled and perplexed minority who would be grateful for any help to understand the meaning of things and that would point the way to that which the Lord would have if He were given His ground. We can but hope that we shall be able to throw some light upon the beclouded way. There is no thought of instituting a new 'Movement' or forming a new body of Christians. The probability is that there will be some strong adverse reactions to some

things said, but we can only ask for patient and open-hearted consideration, taking nothing out of its full context to give it an exaggerated interpretation.

### **The New Deuteronomy**

Behind the subject-matter of the New Testament there is a feature which is not always recognized. It is that which corresponds to the Book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament; the fifth book of the Bible. That book was written with the object of restating precisely that which had been covered earlier in several books. The restatement had two aspects.

One, there had been a history of the people of God which, while it had been marked by His wonderful works of power and mercy - signs, wonders, and glories, had also been darkened with failure and tragedy on their part. A crisis had been reached and a chapter was closing.

Secondly; the call to adjustment was sounding out, and a new day was being presented. A calling to remembrance, a warning against repeating the mistakes, and an earnest appeal, comprised this new document to govern the future. The future was going to be one of greater glory or of deeper tragedy. They must decide.

These are the very two features which lie behind the New Testament writings. When these documents were written a point of crisis and departure had been reached. There had been a period of great glory, power, and progress. Mighty and wonderful things had been done by God amongst His people in the midst of the nations, but certain elements were beginning to show themselves which were threatening the very vitality of their testimony and world-mission. There was a growing threat to the purity and reality of the life of the Church, and there were symptoms of spiritual decline and retrogression. So we find the Apostles giving themselves to write the Deuteronomic documents to remind, to warn, to rebuke, to exhort, to encourage, and to urge God's people to either recover, maintain, or go on in relation to the full purpose of their high calling in Christ. We ought to read John, Peter, Paul, and others in this light. Like Moses, they wrote with an 'after my departure' concern. It was all reminder and reconsideration with the future in view. Were we to put into two words that which we feel to have been the real burden of their writings we should say it was:

### **Corporate Testimony.**

When we have said that we have got within view of the nature of true New Testament Christianity. But we must first define those terms. After we have done that we shall proceed to consider some of the privileges, perils, and problems of corporate testimony.

What does the New Testament mean when it so often, especially at the end, refers to "The Testimony". A simple reading of the context will show that it does not refer to any particular aspect of "The Truth". It is not particularly the truth of the Cross, the Church, the Coming Again of the Lord, or any other. It is not a 'line of teaching' or a particular angle of interpretation or emphasis. It is not the propagation of certain doctrines. Neither is "the Testimony" related to certain ordinances or 'sacraments' such as 'Baptism', 'the Lord's Table', etc. These things may have a vital place *in* the Testimony when it is truly present, but they are not the Testimony.

The Testimony is the place and meaning of Jesus Christ, God's Son, in the eternal counsels of God; His universal fulness as Head of all creation which carries with it the essential nature of His person as the eternal Son of God. It is the *Person*, and particularly the significance of that Person in God's universe and entire system of things. The heart of the Testimony is His absolute triumph over, and destruction of, death by His own 'becoming dead, and being alive for evermore'. This is but a broad and general statement, for it does not say what that universal significance is, but what we have said serves to put the Testimony in its right realm; out of parts into a whole.

The second term to be defined is 'corporate'. While this word is not found in our translations of the Bible, it is inherent therein from beginning to end. Literally and fundamentally it means 'of the body'; that is, 'an organic body matter'. It is the organic and vital unity of a living entity, whether it be in the individual or in the collective relatedness of many. As differing from a stone or wooden structure or composition it is constituted by a single life; it is generic. In that life is an energy. In that life is a nature. In that life is a pattern. In that life is a destiny. To share that life is to share all these impulses.

Thus, in every category or class of animate creatures, God began with a 'seed' in which the germ of its own life, nature, and design existed. The family was inherent in the seed, and the family had the race as its horizon. The first generic person failed in the trust of life and his horizon became beclouded by death. God moved again in Abraham and secured through his faith and obedience, first a nation, and then the far-off 'Seed,' in which and by which the ultimate heavenly race will be secured. This is the *new* creation in Christ, sharing the one life which He came specifically and preeminently to give. This one unique heavenly life, imparted as a particular gift to every one who in 'new birth' is generated by the act of the Spirit of God, binds them together in corporate, organic, basic oneness. It is a *fact*, not always understood, appreciated, or lived up to. The values and meanings of this fact are only entered into by growth in that life and obedience to its laws, but the fact is deeper than the understanding, just as the fact of the organic unity, function, and laws of the human body are deeper than the knowledge of the uninstructed man or woman.

So far we have only indicated what is meant by the term 'corporate'. The fuller meaning will naturally come out in all that we have to say as we go on.

Putting the two terms together - Corporate Testimony, we can now say that 'the Testimony', which is God's testimony concerning His Son, now known to us as Jesus Christ the Lord, with all its vast significance and limitless values and meanings, is intended by God to be incorporated in, revealed in, and expressed through, a corporate Body and spiritual organism known as The Body of Christ. This Body was foreknown and foreordained by God for its eternal vocation "before times eternal". It is *the* supreme object of the Holy Spirit's activities and energies in this present dispensation. It is the essential motif of evangelism, and the purpose of all Christian instruction, discipline, and experience. Its securing "out of the nations" and preparation is the governing purpose of this age, and its full vocation, function, and glory will be through "the ages of the ages". It is never meant to be an end in itself, but its ultimate issue is found in the words:

*"Unto him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all generations for ever and ever" (Ephesians 3:20, 21).*

Fuller previews of the eternal position, glory and vocation of this corporate vessel in testimony are given us in Revelation 5:6-14, and in chapter 21.