

THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

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(Continued from last week)

4. The Bible teaches that the witness of the Divine spirit consists in "A communication made by the Holy Ghost to the believer's mind of the fact that his sins are forgiven, that he is reconciled to God, and that the filial relation, which was destroyed by disobedience, is now restored by grace through faith." Some have regarded John Wesley's definition as the best ever written by an uninspired hand: "By the testimony of the Spirit I mean an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God immediately and directly witnesses to my spirit that I am a child of God, that Jesus Christ hath loved me and given Himself for me, that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God." This is an excellent definition as far as it goes; but it is not complete, as we shall hereafter show.

Quite similar is Dr. Hannah's definition, who writes, "The witness of the Spirit is that which directly ascertains (affirms) to us the blessing of our acceptance with God, and which impressing on our hearts a sense of His fraternal love toward us in Christ Jesus, creates within us that great element and principle of the new nature—love to Him in return." The latter part of this definition describes the result of the witness of the Spirit, rather than the witness itself.

Other scriptures than those above quoted describe this witness: "We received not the spirit of the world but the Spirit which is from God, that we might know the things that were freely given to us of God" (1 Cor. 2:12). Isaiah 12:2, "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid; for Jehovah, even Jehovah, is my strength and song; and he is become my salvation." Both passages imply a divine witness.

"The Spirit himself beareth WITNESS with our spirits that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:16). Now a witness is not an inferential deduction of logic, not a process of conjecture, but an implicit testimony, distinctly given.

Moreover, the Spirit witnesses often to what takes place only in the mind of God, not in ourselves. The forgiveness of our sins is something that God does not do in us, but for us in His own heart. We need to know it, and it is one of "the deep things of God," that can be known directly only by the supernatural communication of His Spirit. There are things that we cannot find out by the use of our reason or the evidence of our senses; "but unto us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God" (1 Cor. 2:9, 10).

We know there are some great theologians who deny this as their own experience. Dr. Chalmers said that he could not, without making his doctrine outstrip his own experience, vouch for any other intimation of the Spirit of God than that which He gives in the act of making the Word of God and the state of our own hearts clear to us. But, on the other hand, there are multitudes who can say from their own experience with Dr. Watts, "There is an extraordinary witness of the Spirit when, in an immediate and powerful manner, He impresses the soul with an assurance of divine love, and gives the heart of the saint a full discovery of his adoption, without the more slow and argumentative method of comparing the dispositions of their souls with some special characters of the children of God in Scripture." Just as Jesus when on earth said to the penitent with His own dear lips, "Thy sins are forgiven thee," so now He gives the same sweet assurance to believing sinners, through His

representative, the Holy Spirit. Only thus can we know immediately, by this direct testimony of the Spirit, that God has forgiven us and adopted us. Nothing but this can make our joy of sonship simultaneous with its existence. Otherwise we should be compelled to wait a long time for the evidence of experience in sad uncertainty as to whether Christ had forgiven us, and God had received us or not.

II. Let Us Not Consider the Witness of Our Own Spirit

What is that? Wesley defined it as a 'consciousness of our having received in and by the Spirit of Adoption, the tempers mentioned in the Word of God as belonging to His adopted children; a consciousness that we are inwardly conformed, by the Spirit of God, to the image of His Son, and that we walk before Him in justice, mercy, and truth, doing the things that are pleasing in His sight.' "It is nearly, if not exactly, the same with the testimony of a good conscience toward God; and is the result of reason and reflection on what we feel in our own souls. Strictly speaking, it is a conclusion drawn partly from the Word of God, and partly from our own experience. The Word of God says every one who has the fruit of the Spirit is a child of God; experience of inward consciousness tells me that I have the fruit of the Spirit; and hence I rationally conclude that therefore I am a child of God."

Dr. Hannah puts it in similar words thus: "The witness of our spirit is that rational inference which, proceeding from a careful examination of the scriptural marks of the children of God, and a satisfactory persuasion that these marks are produced in us by the presence and agency of the Holy Spirit, confirms us in the grateful conclusion that we are the children of God."

III. Some Might Ask Why There is a Need of Two Witnesses to One Testimony.

We may be very thankful there are two witnesses. By their consenting testimony they save us from fanaticism and delusion. It is quite possible for human beings to be deceived about themselves. They may be deluded by their own heated imaginations. The devil himself also may counterfeit the Spirit of God and speak lying words to the heart, and deceive it by flattery, inducing false hopes of safety. The consolations of the Spirit are unknown until there has previously been a hearty repentance of sin, and an utter abandonment of all iniquity, coupled with an acceptance of Christ by faith as the only hope. And in the after life there must appear more and more the fruits of the divine life. The Christian graces must be in evidence. These things in the experience become a matter of consciousness that each soul may easily test for himself. Where the Holy Spirit bears witness to a child of God of his adoption, He also produces a Christian character. Where this is wanting it is presumption to suppose that one has heard from heaven, or is now in a state of grace. So the witness of our spirit tests the reality of the heavenly witness.

1. We may further remark in this connection that this joint witness is the privilege of all God's children. It is a part of our common salvation as much as adoption itself. "Because ye are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts crying Abba, Father." It is a birthright privilege of every child of God. There is a rest for troubled heart, a peace with God which the world cannot give or take away. It is for all who will trust and obey.

2. But let it be further said, that this united witness of the Holy Spirit and our spirit may be interrupted, or suspended for a time, or even wholly lost. "And unless," says Field, "we learn to live by the faith of the Son of God, and maintain diligence in Christian duty, it is impossible to retain it. The withdrawal of His favor and witnessing presence and peace may be His chastisement for our disobedience." "Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you" (Isa. 59:2.)

3. But there may be other reasons for the interruption and cessation of the witness. Times of service and heavy trial may be taken advantage of by Satan to insinuate doubts. The mind may be depressed through bodily disorders, or be in heaviness through manifold temptations (I. Peter 1:6.) Dyspepsia is peculiarly calculated to depress the feelings and cloud spiritual vision. The reaction from great spiritual excitement and exaltation, and from intense, overwrought exertion may also be used by Satan to disturb our peace. Both Elijah and John the Baptist thus suffered from spiritual depression.

Furthermore, a saint of God may be afflicted by a melancholy temperament and periods of constitutional depression which prey upon the soul. This is an inherited mental malady which Satan gladly uses to cast down believers and obscure their views and confidence in God. It makes the mind morbid and despondent and unfit to hear the divine voice or see the smile of His face.

4. But there is a cure even for these exceptional times and temperaments. It is then that the witness is most needed; and it can be obtained by prayer and the upward look of faith. It is God's will that His children should "abide in his love" (John 15:9, 10); should "rejoice in the Lord alway" (Phil. 4:4); and "in everything give thanks" (I. Thess. 5:18); and "walk in the light" (Isa. 2:5, and I. John 1:7) and "joy in the God of our salvation" (Hab. 3:18).

IV. We Would Add that the Holy Spirit Not Only Witnesses to Our Adoption but Also to Our Sanctification.

Indeed even this is not all, for He witnesses to every condition of the human heart. He powerfully convicts the world of sinners "of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment of sin because they believe not on me" (John 16:8, 9). All the conviction work of the Holy Spirit is only His witness against sin and the sinner. When a Christian backslides, the Spirit chides him for it; as the inspired Nathan said to David, "Thou art the man." When a sinner accepts Christ and is received into the family of God, as we have seen, the Spirit bears witness to the fact. And in the same manner and with the same fidelity and certainty, when a believer receives the sanctifying baptism with the Holy Spirit for a clean heart, it is certified to him from heaven. Thus the Holy Ghost is a witness bearer to all humanity of their spiritual condition.

In proof of the Spirit's witness to sanctification, let us hear the apostle Peter tell about the experience of Cornelius and his people: "And God, who knoweth the heart, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; and he made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:8, 9, R. V.) Turn also to that companion scripture, Heb. 10:14, "For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that