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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 11

The Witness of the Spirit: Discourse Two

"The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." Rom. 8:16

I. 1. None who believe the Scriptures to be the word of God, can doubt the importance of such a truth as this; -- a truth revealed therein, not once only, not obscurely, not incidentally; but frequently, and that in express terms; but solemnly and of set purpose, as denoting one of the peculiar privileges of the children of God.

2. And it is the more necessary to explain and defend this truth, because there is a danger on the right hand and on the left. If we deny it, there is a danger lest our religion degenerate into mere formality; lest, "having a form of godliness," we neglect, if not "deny, the power of it." If we allow it, but do not understand what we allow, we are liable to run into all the wildness of enthusiasm. It is therefore needful, in the highest degree, to guard those who fear God from both those dangers by a scriptural and rational illustration and confirmation of this momentous truth.

3. It may seem, something of this kind is the more needful, because so little has been wrote on the subject with any clearness; unless some discourses on the wrong side of the question, which explain it quite away. And it cannot be doubted, but these were occasioned, at least in a great measure, by the crude, unscriptural, irrational explication of others, who "knew not what they spake, nor whereof they affirmed."

4. It more nearly concerns the Methodists, so called, clearly to understand, explain, and defend this doctrine; because it is one grand part of the testimony which God has given them to bear to all mankind. It is by this peculiar blessing upon them in searching the Scriptures, confirmed by the experience of his children, that this great evangelical truth has been recovered, which had been or many years well nigh lost and forgotten.

II. 1. But what is the witness of the Spirit The original word *marturia* may be rendered either (as it is in several places) the witness, or less ambiguously, the testimony, or the record: So it is rendered in our translation, (1 John 5:11,) "This is the record," the testimony, the sum of what God testifies in all the inspired writings, "that God hath given unto us eternal life, and this life is in his Son." The testimony now under consideration is given by the Spirit of God to and with our spirit: He is the Person testifying. What he testifies to us is, "that we are the children of God." The immediate result of this testimony is, "the fruit of the Spirit;" namely, "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness:" and without these, the testimony itself cannot continue. For it is inevitably destroyed, not only by the commission of any outward sin, or the omission of known duty, but by giving way to any inward sin; in a word, by whatever grieves the Holy Spirit of God.

2. I observed many years ago, "It is hard to find words in the language of men, to explain the deep things of God. Indeed there are none that will adequately express what the Spirit of God works in his children. But perhaps one might say, (desiring any who are taught of God, to correct, soften, or strengthen the expression,) 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."

3. After twenty years' further consideration, I see no cause to retract any part of this. Neither do I conceive how any of these expressions may be altered, so as to make them more intelligible. I can only add, that if any of the children of God will point out any other expressions, which are more clear, or more agreeable to the word of God, I will readily lay these aside.

4. Meantime let it be observed, I do not mean hereby, that the Spirit of God testifies this by any outward voice; no, nor always by an inward voice, although he may do this sometimes. Neither do I suppose, that he always applies to the heart (though he often may) one or more texts of Scripture. But he so works upon the soul by his immediate influence, and by a strong, though inexplicable operation, that the stormy wind and troubled waves subside, and there is a sweet calm; the heart resting as in the arms of Jesus, and the sinner being clearly satisfied that God is reconciled, that all his "iniquities are forgiven, and his sins covered."

5. Now what is the matter of dispute concerning this Not whether there be a witness or testimony of the Spirit. Not whether the Spirit does testify with our spirit, that we are the children of God. None can deny this, without flatly contradicting the Scriptures, and charging a lie upon the God of truth. Therefore, that there is a testimony of the Spirit is acknowledged by all parties.

6. Neither is it questioned whether there is an indirect witness or testimony, that we are the children of God. This is nearly, if not exactly, the same with the testimony of a good conscience towards God; and is the result of reason, or 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, or inward consciousness, tells me, that I have the fruit of the Spirit; and hence I rationally conclude, "Therefore I am a child of God." This is likewise allowed on all hands, and so is no matter of controversy.

7. Nor do we assert, that there can be any real testimony of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit. We assert, on the contrary, that the fruit of the Spirit immediately springs from this testimony; not always indeed in the same degree, even when the testimony is first given: and much less afterwards neither joy nor peace is always at one stay; no, nor love; as neither is the testimony itself always equally strong and clear.

8. But the point in question is, whether there be any direct testimony of the Spirit at all; whether there be any other testimony of the Spirit, than that which arises from a consciousness of the fruit.

III. 1. I believe there is; because that is the plain, natural meaning of the text, "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." It is manifest, here are two witnesses mentioned, who together testify the same thing; the Spirit of God, and our own spirit. The late Bishop of London, in his sermon on this text, seems astonished that any one can doubt of this, which appears upon the very face of the words. Now, "The testimony of our own spirit," says the Bishop, "is one, which is the consciousness of our own sincerity;" or, to express the same thing a little more clearly, the consciousness of the fruit of the Spirit. When our spirit is conscious of this, of love, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, it easily infers from these premises, that we are the children of God.

2. It is true, that great man supposed the other witness to be, "The consciousness of our own good works." This, he affirms, is the testimony of God's Spirit. But this is included in the testimony of our own spirit; yea, and in sincerity, even according to the common sense of the word. So the Apostle, "Our rejoicing in this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity refers to our

words and actions, as least as much as to our inward dispositions. So that this is not another witness, but the very same that he mentioned before; the consciousness of our good works being only one branch of the consciousness of our sincerity. Consequently here is only one witness still. If therefore the text speaks of two witnesses, one of these is not the consciousness of our good works, neither of our sincerity; all this being manifestly contained in the testimony of our spirit.

3. What then is the other witness This might easily be learned, if the text itself were not sufficiently clear, from the verse immediately preceding: Ye have received, not the spirit of bondage, but the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father: It follows, The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.

4. This is farther explained by the parallel text, (Gal. 4:6,) "Because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying Abba, Father." Is not this something immediate and direct, not the result of reflection or argumentation Does not his Spirit cry, "Abba, Father," in our hearts the moment it is given, antecedently to any reflection upon our sincerity; yea, to any reasoning whatsoever And is not this the plain natural sense of the words, which strikes any one as soon as he hears them All these texts then, in their most obvious meaning, describe a direct testimony of the Spirit.

5. That the testimony of the Spirit of God must, in the very nature of things, be antecedent to the testimony of our own spirit, may appear from this single consideration: We must be holy in heart and life before we can be conscious that we are so. But we must love God before we can be holy at all, this being the root of holiness. Now we cannot love God, till we know he loves us: We love him, because he first loved us: And we cannot know his love to us, till his Spirit witnesses it to our spirit. Till then we cannot believe it; we cannot say, "The life which I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."

Then, only then we feel Our interest in his blood,

And cry, with joy unspeakable, Thou art my Lord, my God! Since, therefore, the testimony of his Spirit must precede the love of God, and all holiness, of consequence it must precede our consciousness thereof.

6. And here properly comes in, to confirm this scriptural doctrine, the experience of the children of God; the experience not of two or three, not of a few, but of a great multitude which no man can number. It has been confirmed, both in this, and in all ages, by "a cloud" of living and dying "witnesses." It is confirmed by your experience and mine. The Spirit itself bore witness to my spirit that I was a child of God, gave me an evidence hereof, and I immediately cried, "Abba, Father!" And this I did, (and so did you,) before I reflected on, or was conscious of, any fruit of the Spirit. It was from this testimony received, that love, joy, peace, and the whole fruit of the Spirit flowed. First, I heard,

Thy sins are forgiven! Accepted thou art! --

I listen and heaven sprung up in my heart.

7. But this is confirmed, not only by experience of the children of God; -- thousands of whom can declare that they never did know themselves to be in the favour of God till it was directly witnessed to

them by his Spirit; --but by all those who are convinced of sin, who feel the wrath of God abiding on them. These cannot be satisfied with any thing less than a direct testimony from his Spirit, that he is "merciful to their unrighteousness, and remembers their sins and iniquities no more." Tell any of these, "You are to know you are a child, by reflecting on what he has wrought in you, on your love, joy, and peace; and will he not immediately reply, "By all this I know I am a child of the devil I have no more love to God than the devil has; my carnal mind is enmity against God. I have no joy in the Holy Ghost; my soul is sorrowful even unto death. I have no peace; my heart is a troubled sea; I am all storm and tempest." And which way can these souls possibly be comforted, but by a divine testimony not that they are good, or sincere, or conformable to the Scripture in heart and life, but) that God justifieth the ungodly --him that, till the moment he is justified, is all ungodly, void of all true holiness; him that worketh not, that worketh nothing that is truly good, till he is conscious that he is accepted, not for any works of righteousness which he hath done, but by the mere, free mercy of God; wholly and solely for what the Son of God hath done and suffered for him. And can it be any otherwise, if "a man is justified by faith, without the works of the law" If so, what inward or outward goodness can he be conscious of, antecedent to his justification Nay, is not the having nothing to pay, that is, the being conscious that "there dwelleth in us no good thing," neither inward nor outward goodness, essentially, indispensably necessary, before we can be "justified freely, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ" Was ever any man justified since his coming into the world, or can any man ever be justified, till he is brought to that point,

I give up every plea beside, --

Lord, I am damn'd; but Thou has died

8. Every one, therefore, who denies the existence of such a testimony, does in effect deny justification by faith. It follows, that either he never experienced this, either he never was justified, or that he has forgotten, as St. Peter speaks, *tau kaqarismou tvn palai amartivn*, the purification from his former sins, the experience he then had himself; the manner wherein God wrought in his own soul, when his former sins were blotted out.

9. And the experience even of the children of the world here confirms that of the children of God. Many of these have a desire to please God: Some of them take much pains to please him: But do they not, one and all, count it the highest absurdity for any to talk of knowing his sins are forgiven Which of them even pretends to any such thing And yet many of them are conscious of their own sincerity. Many of them undoubtedly have, in a degree, the testimony of their own spirit, a consciousness of their own uprightness. But this brings them no consciousness that they are forgiven; no knowledge that they are the children of God. Yea, the more sincere they are, the more uneasy they generally are, for want of knowing it; plainly showing that this cannot be known, in a satisfactory manner, by the bare testimony of our own spirit, without God's directly testifying that we are his children.

IV. But abundance of objections have been made to this; the chief of which it may be well to consider.

1. It is objected, First, "Experience is not sufficient to prove a doctrine which is not founded on Scripture." This is undoubtedly true; and it is an important truth; but it does not affect the present question; for it has been shown, that this doctrine is founded on Scripture: Therefore experience is properly alleged to confirm it.

2. But madmen, French prophets, and enthusiasts of every kind, have imagined they experienced this

witness. They have so; and perhaps not a few of them did, although they did not retain it long: But if they did not, this is no proof at all that others have not experienced it; as a madman's imagining himself a king, does not prove that there are no real kings.

"Nay, many who pleaded strongly for this, have utterly decried the Bible." Perhaps so; but this was no necessary consequence: Thousands plead for it who have the highest esteem for the Bible.

"Yea, but many have fatally deceived themselves hereby, and got above all conviction."

And yet a scriptural doctrine is no worse though men abuse it to their own destruction.

3. "But I lay it down as an undoubted truth, the fruit of the Spirit is the witness of the Spirit." Not undoubted; thousands doubt of, yea, flatly deny it: But let that pass. If this witness be sufficient, there is no need of any other. But it is sufficient, unless in one of these cases, 1. The total absence of the fruit of the Spirit. And this is the case, when the direct witness is first given. 2. The not perceiving it. But to contend for it in this case, is to contend for being in the favour of God, and not knowing it. True; not knowing it at that time any otherwise than by the testimony which is given for that end. And this we do contend for; we contend that the direct witness may shine clear, even while the indirect one is under a cloud.

4. It is objected, Secondly, "The design of the witness contended for is, to prove that the profession we make is genuine. But it does not prove this. I answer, the proving this is not the design of it. It is antecedent to our making any profession at all, but that of being lost, undone, guilty, helpless sinners. It is designed to assure those to whom it is given, that they are the children of God; that they are "justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ." And this does not suppose that their preceding thoughts, words, and actions, are conformable to the rule of Scripture; it supposes quite the reverse; namely, that they are sinners all over; sinners both in heart and life. Were it otherwise, God would justify the godly and their own works would be counted to them for righteousness. And I cannot but fear that a supposition of our being justified by works is at the root of all these objections; for, whoever cordially believes that God imputes to all that are justified righteousness without works, will find no difficulty in allowing the witness of his Spirit, preceding the fruit of it.

5. It is objected, Thirdly, "One Evangelist says, 'Your heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him.' The other Evangelist calls the same thing 'good gifts;' abundantly demonstrating that the Spirit's way of bearing witness is by giving good gifts." Nay, here is nothing at all about bearing witness, either in the one text or the other. Therefore till this demonstration is better demonstrated, I let it stand as it is.

6. It is objected, Fourthly, "The Scripture says, 'The tree is known by its fruits. Prove all things. Try the spirits. Examine yourselves.'" Most true: Therefore, let every man who believes he hath the witness in himself, try whether it be of God; if the fruit follow, it is; otherwise it is not. For certainly "the tree is known by its fruit:" Hereby we prove if it be of God. "But the direct witness is never referred to in the Book of God." Not as standing alone; not as a single witness; but as connected with the other; as giving a joint testimony; testifying with our spirit, that we are children of God. And who is able to prove, that it is not thus referred to in this very Scripture "Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, that Jesus Christ is in you" It is by no means clear, that they did not know this by a direct as well as a remote witness. How is it proved,

that they did not know it, First, by an inward consciousness; and Then, by love, joy and peace

7. "But the testimony arising from the internal and external change is constantly referred to in the Bible. It is so: And we constantly refer thereto, to confirm the testimony of the Spirit.

"Nay, all the marks you have given, whereby to distinguish the operations of God's Spirit from delusion, refer to the change wrought in us and upon us. This, likewise, is undoubtedly true.

8. It is objected, Fifthly, that "the direct witness of the Spirit does not secure us from the greatest delusion. And is that a witness fit to be trusted, whose testimony cannot be depended on That is forced to fly to something else, to prove what it asserts" I answer: To secure us from all delusion, God gives us two witnesses that we are his children. And this they testify conjointly. Therefore, "what God hath joined together, let no man put asunder." And while they are joined, we cannot be deluded: Their testimony can be depended on. They are fit to be trusted in the highest degree, and need nothing else to prove what they assert.

"Nay, the direct witness only asserts, but does not prove, any thing." By two witnesses shall every word be established. And when the Spirit witnesses with our spirit, as God designs it to do, then it fully proves that we are children of God.

9. It is objected, Sixthly, You own the change wrought is a sufficient testimony, unless in the case of severe trials, such as that of our Saviour upon the cross; but none of us can be tried in that manner. But you or I may be tried in such a manner, and so may any other child of God, that it will be impossible for us to keep our filial confidence in God without the direct witness of his Spirit.

10. It is objected, Lastly, "The greatest contenders for it are some of the proudest and most uncharitable of men." Perhaps some of the hottest contenders for it are both proud and uncharitable; but many of the firmest contenders for it are eminently meek and lowly in heart; and, indeed, in all other respects also,

True followers of their lamb-like Lord.

The preceding objections are the most considerable that I have heard, and I believe contain the strength of the cause. Yet I apprehend whoever calmly and impartially considers those objections and the answers together, will easily see that they do not destroy, no, nor weaken, the evidence of that great truth, that the Spirit of God does directly as well as indirectly, testify that we are children of God.

V. 1. The sum of all this is: The testimony of the Spirit is an inward impression on the souls of believers, whereby the Spirit of God directly testifies to their spirit, that they are children of God. And it is not questioned, whether there is a testimony of the Spirit; but whether there is an direct testimony; whether there is any other than that which arises from a consciousness of the fruit of the Spirit. We believe there is; because this is the plain natural meaning of the text, illustrated both by the preceding words, and by the parallel passage in the Epistle to the Galatians; because, in the nature of the thing, the testimony must precede the fruit which springs from it and because this plain meaning of the word of God is confirmed by the experience of innumerable children of God; yea, and by the experience of all who are convinced of sin, who can never rest till they have a direct witness; and even of the children of the world, who, not having the witness in themselves, one and all declare, none can

know his sins forgiven.

2. And whereas it is objected, that experience is not sufficient to prove a doctrine unsupported by Scripture; -- that madmen and enthusiasts of every kind have imagined such a witness that the design of that witness is to prove our profession genuine, which design it does not answer; -- that the Scripture says, "The tree is known by its fruit;" "examine yourselves; prove your ownelves;" and, meantime, the direct witness is never referred to in all the Book of God; -- that it does not secure us from the greatest delusions; and, Lastly,, that the change wrought in us is a sufficient testimony, unless in such trials as Christ alone suffered: -- We answer, 1. Experience is sufficient to confirm a doctrine which is grounded on Scripture. 2. Though many fancy they experience what they do not, this is no prejudice to real experience. 3. The design of that witness is, to assure us we are children of God; and this design it does answer. 4. The true witness of the Spirit is known by its fruit, "love, peace, joy;" not indeed preceding, but following it. 5. It cannot be proved, that the direct as well as the indirect witness is not referred to in that very text, "Know ye not your ownelves, that Jesus Christ is in you 6. The Spirit of God, witnessing with our spirit, does secure us from all delusion: And, Lastly, we are all liable to trials, wherein the testimony of our own spirit is not sufficient; wherein nothing less than the direct testimony of God's Spirit can assure us that we are his children.

3. Two inferences may be drawn from the whole: The First, let none ever presume to rest in any supposed testimony of the Spirit which is separate from the fruit of it. If the Spirit of God does really testify that we are the children of God, the immediate consequence will be the fruit of the Spirit, even "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, fidelity, meekness, temperance." And however this fruit may be clouded for a while, during the time of strong temptation, so that it does not appear to the tempted person, while Satan is sifting him as wheat; yet the substantial part of it remains, even under the thickest cloud. It is true, joy in the Holy Ghost may be withdrawn, during the hour of trial; yea, the soul may be "exceeding sorrowful," while "the hour and power of darkness" continue; but even this is generally restored with increase, till we rejoice "with joy unspeakable and full of glory."

4. The Second inference, is, let none rest in any supposed fruit of the Spirit without the witness. There may be foretastes of the Spirit without the witness. There may be foretastes of joy, of peace, of love, and those not delusive, but really from God, long before we have the witness in ourselves; before the Spirit of God witnesses with our spirits that we have "redemption in the blood of Jesus, even the forgiveness of sins." Yea, there may be a degree of long-suffering, of gentleness, of fidelity, meekness, temperance, (not a shadow thereof, but a real degree, by the preventing grace of God,) before we "are accepted in the Beloved," and, consequently, before we have a testimony of our acceptance: But it is by no means advisable to rest here; it is at the peril of our souls if we do. If we are wise, we shall be continually crying to God, until his Spirit cry in our heart, "Abba, Father!" This is the privilege of all the children of God, and without this we can never be assured that we are his children. Without this we cannot retain a steady peace, nor avoid perplexing doubts and fears. But when we have once received this Spirit of adoption, this "peace which passeth all understanding," and which expels all painful doubt and fear, will "keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." And when this has brought forth its genuine fruit, all inward and outward holiness, it is undoubtedly the will of Him that calleth us, to give us always what he has once given; so that there is no need that we should ever more be deprived of either the testimony of God's Spirit, or the testimony of our own, the consciousness of our walking in all righteousness and true holiness. Newry, April 4, 1767.

Edited by Mrs. Connie Dunn (Academic Dean, Nazarene Theological College in Brisbane,

Queensland, Australia), with corrections by Ryan Danker and George Lyons of Northwest Nazarene College (Nampa, Idaho) for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology.

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