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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 10

The Witness of the Spirit: Discourse One

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

1. How many vain men, not understanding what they spake, neither whereof they affirmed, have wrested this Scripture to the great loss if not the destruction of their souls! How many have mistaken the voice of their own imagination for this witness of the Spirit of God, and thence idly presumed they were the children of God while they were doing the works of the devil! These are truly and properly enthusiasts; and, indeed, in the worst sense of the word. But with what difficulty are they convinced thereof, especially if they have drank deep into that spirit of error! All endeavours to bring them to the knowledge of themselves they will then account fighting against God; and that vehemence and impetuosity of spirit which they call "contending earnestly for the faith," sets them so far above all the usual methods of conviction that we may well say, "With men it is impossible."

2. Who can then be surprised if many reasonable men, seeing the dreadful effects of this delusion, and labouring to keep at the utmost distance from it, should sometimes lean toward another extreme -- if they are not forward to believe any who speak of having this witness concerning which others have so grievously erred -- if they are almost ready to set all down for enthusiasts, who use the expressions which have been so terribly abused -- yea, if they should question whether the witness or testimony here spoken of, be the privilege of ordinary Christians, and not, rather, one of those extraordinary gifts which they suppose belonged only to the apostolic age

3. But is there any necessity laid upon us of running either into one extreme or the other May we not steer a middle course -- keep a sufficient distance from that spirit of error and enthusiasm, without denying the gift of God, and giving up the great privilege of his children Surely we may. In order thereto, let us consider, in the presence and fear of God,

First. What is this witness or testimony of our spirit; what is the testimony of God's Spirit; and, how does he "bear witness with our spirit that we are the children of God"

Secondly. How is this joint testimony of God's Spirit and our own, clearly and solidly distinguished from the presumption of a natural mind, and from the delusion of the devil

I. 1. Let us first consider, what is the witness or testimony of our spirit. But here I cannot but desire all those who are for swallowing up the testimony of the Spirit of God, in the rational testimony of our own spirit, to observe, that in this text the Apostle is so far from speaking of the testimony of our own spirit only, that it may be questioned whether he speaks of it at all, -- whether he does not speak only of the testimony of God's Spirit. It does not appear but the original text may fairly be understood thus. The Apostle had just said, in the preceding verse, "Ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father;" and immediately subjoins, *Auto to pneuma* (some copies read *to auto pneuma*) *summarturei tv pneumatihm, oti esmen tekna qeou*, which may be translated, "The same Spirit beareth witness to our spirit that we are the children of God" (the preposition *sun* only denoting that he witnesses this at the same time that he enables us to cry Abba, Father.) But I contend not; seeing so many other texts, with the experience of all real Christians, sufficiently evince, that there is in every believer, both the testimony of God's Spirit, and the testimony of his own, that he is a child of God.

2. With regard to the latter, the foundation thereof is laid in those numerous texts of Scripture which

describe the marks of the children of God; and that so plain, that he which runneth may read them. These are also collected together, and placed in the strongest light, by many both ancient and modern writers. If any need farther light, he may receive it by attending on the ministry of God's Word; by meditating thereon before God in secret; and by conversing with those who have the knowledge of his ways. And by the reason or understanding that God has given him, which religion was designed not to extinguish, but to perfect; -- according to that of the Apostle, "Brethren, be not children in understanding; in malice" or wickedness "be ye children; but in understanding be ye men;" (1 Cor. 14:20;) -- every man applying those scriptural marks to himself, may know whether he is a child of God. Thus, if he know, First, "as many as are led by the Spirit of God," into all holy tempers and actions, "they are the sons of God;" (for which he has the infallible assurance of holy writ;) Secondly, I am thus "led by the Spirit of God;" he will easily conclude, -- "Therefore I am a son of God."

3. Agreeable to this are all those plain declarations of St. John, in his First Epistle: "Hereby we know that we do know him, if we keep his commandments." (1 John 2:3.) "Whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected; Hereby know we that we are in him;" that we are indeed the children of God. (1 John 2:5.) "If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that everyone that doeth righteousness is born of him." (1 John 2:29.) "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren." (1 John 3:14) "Hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him;" namely, because we "love one another not in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth." "Hereby know we that we dwell in him, because he hath given us of his" loving "Spirit." (1 John 4:13.) And, "hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the" obedient "spirit which he hath given us." (1 John 3:24.)

4. It is highly probable there never were any children of God, from the beginning of the world unto this day, who were farther advanced in the grace of God and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, than the Apostle John, at the time when he wrote these words, and the fathers in Christ to whom he wrote. Notwithstanding which, it is evident both the Apostle himself, and all those pillars in God's temple, were very far from despising these marks of their being the children of God; and that they applied them to their own souls for the confirmation of their faith. Yet all this is no other than rational evidence, the witness of our spirit, our reason or understanding. It all resolves into this: Those who have these marks are the children of God: But we have these marks. Therefore we are children of God.

5. But how does it appear, that we have these marks This is a question which still remains. How does it appear, that we do love God and our neighbour, and that we keep his commandments Observe, that the meaning of the question is, How does it appear to ourselves, not to others I would ask him, then, that proposes this question, How does it appear to you that you are alive, and that you are now in ease, and not in pain Are you not immediately conscious of it By the same immediate consciousness, you will know if your soul is alive to God; if you are saved from the pain of proud wrath, and have the ease of a meek and quiet spirit. By the same means you cannot but perceive if you love, rejoice, and delight in God. By the same you must be directly assured, if you love your neighbour as yourself; if you are kindly affectioned to all mankind, and full of gentleness and longsuffering. And with regard to the outward mark of the children of God, which is, according to St. John, the keeping his commandments, you undoubtedly know in your own breast, if, by the grace of God, it belongs to you. Your conscience informs you from day to day, if you do not take the name of God within your lips unless with seriousness and devotion, with reverence and godly fear; if you remember the Sabbath-day to keep it holy; if you honour your father and mother; if you do to all as you would they should do unto you; if you possess your body in sanctification and honour; and if, whether you eat or drink, you are

temperate therein, and do all to the glory of God.

6. Now this is properly the testimony of our own spirit; even the testimony of our conscience, that God hath given us to be holy of heart, and holy in outward conversation. It is 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; even a loving heart toward God and toward all mankind; hanging with childlike confidence on God our Father, desiring nothing but him, casting all our care upon him, and embracing every child of man with earnest, tender affection: -- 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 which are pleasing in his sight.

7. But what is that testimony of God's Spirit, which is superadded to, and conjoined with, this How does he "bear witness with our spirit that we are the children of God" 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 children of God experience. But perhaps one might say, (desiring any who are taught of God to correct, to soften or strengthen the expression,) The testimony of the Spirit is an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given himself for me; and that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.

8. That this testimony of the Spirit of God must needs, 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 of heart, and holy in life before we can be conscious that we are so; before we can have the testimony of our spirit, that we are inwardly and outwardly holy. But we must love God, before we can be holy at all; this being the root of all 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 pardoning love to us, till his Spirit witnesses it to our spirit. Since, therefore, this testimony of his Spirit must precede the love of God and all holiness, of consequence it must precede our inward consciousness thereof, or the testimony of our spirit concerning them.

9. Then, and not till then, -- when the Spirit of God beareth that witness to our spirit, "God hath loved thee, and given his own Son to be the propitiation for thy sins; the Son of God hath loved thee, and hath washed thee from thy sins in his blood," -- "we love God, because he first loved us;" and, for his sake, we love our brother also. And of this we cannot but be conscious to ourselves: We "know the things that are freely given to us of God." We know that we love God and keep his commandments; and "hereby also we know that we are of God." This is that testimony of our own spirit, which, so long as we continue to love God and keep his commandments, continues joined with the testimony of God's Spirit, "that we are the children of God."

10. Not that I would by any means be understood, by anything which has been spoken concerning it, to exclude the operation of the Spirit of God, even from the testimony of our own spirit. In no wise. It is he that not only worketh in us every manner of thing that is good, but also shines upon his own work, and clearly shows what he has wrought. Accordingly, this is spoken of by St. Paul, as one great end of our receiving the Spirit, "that we may know the things which are freely given to us of God:" That he may strengthen the testimony of our conscience, touching our 'simplicity and godly sincerity;" and give us to discern, in a fuller and stronger light, that we now do the things which please him.

11. Should it still be inquired, "How does the Spirit of God bear witness with our spirit, that we are the

children of God,' so as to exclude all doubt, and evince the reality of our sonship" -- the answer is clear from what has been observed above. And, First, as to the witness of our spirit: The soul as intimately and evidently perceives when it loves, delights, and rejoices in God, as when it loves and delights in anything on earth. And it can no more doubt, whether it loves, delights, and rejoices or no, than whether it exists or no. If, therefore this be just reasoning,

He that now loves God, that delights and rejoices in him with an humble joy, and holy delight, and an obedient love, is a child of God;

But I thus love, delight, and rejoice in God;

Therefore, I am a child of God: -- Then a Christian can in no wise doubt of his being a child of God. Of the former proposition he has as full an assurance as he has that the Scriptures are of God; and of his thus loving God, he has an inward proof, which is nothing short of self-evidence. Thus, the testimony of our own spirit is with the most intimate conviction manifested to our hearts, in such a manner, as beyond all reasonable doubt to evince the reality of our sonship.

12. The manner how the divine testimony is manifested to the heart, I do not take upon me to explain. Such knowledge is too wonderful and excellent for me: I cannot attain unto it. The wind bloweth, and I hear the sound thereof; but I cannot tell how it cometh, or whither it goeth. As no one knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of a man that is in him; so the manner of the things of God knoweth no one, save the Spirit of God. But the fact we know; namely, that the Spirit of God does give a believer such a testimony of his adoption that while it is present to the soul, he can no more doubt the reality of his sonship, than he can doubt of the shining of the sun, while he stands full blaze of his beams.

II. 1. How this joint testimony of God's Spirit and our spirit may be clearly and solidly distinguished from the presumption of a natural mind, and from the delusion of the devil, is the next thing to be considered. And it highly imports all who desire the salvation of God, to consider it with the deepest attention, as they would not deceive their own souls. An error in this is generally observed to have the most fatal consequences; the rather, because he that errs, seldom discovers his mistake till it is too late to remedy it.

2. And, First, how is this testimony to be distinguished from the presumption of a natural mind It is certain, one who was never convinced of sin, is always ready to flatter himself, and to think of himself, especially in spiritual things, more highly than he ought to think. And hence, it is in no wise strange, if one who is vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, when he hears of this privilege of true Christians, among whom he undoubtedly ranks himself, should soon work himself up into a persuasion that he is already possessed thereof. Such instances now abound in the world, and have abounded in all ages. How then may the real testimony of the Spirit with our spirit, be distinguished from this damning presumption

3. I answer, the Holy Scriptures abound with marks, whereby the one may be distinguished from the other. They describe, in the plainest manner, the circumstances which go before, which accompany, and which follow, the true, genuine testimony of the Spirit of God with the spirit of a believer. Whoever carefully weighs and attends to these will not need to put darkness for light. He will perceive so wide a difference, with respect to all these, between the real and the pretended witness of the Spirit, that there will be no danger, I might say, no possibility, of confounding the one with the other.

4. By these, one who vainly presumes on the gift of God might surely know, if he really desired it, that he hath been hitherto "given up to a strong delusion," and suffered to believe a lie. For the Scriptures lay down those clear, obvious marks, as preceding, accompanying, and following that gift, which a little reflection would convince him, beyond all doubt, were never found in his soul. For instance: The Scripture describes repentance, or conviction of sin, as constantly going before this witness of pardon. So, "Repent; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt. 3:2.) "Repent ye, and believe the gospel." (Mark 1:15.) "Repent, and be baptized every one of you for the remission of sins." (Acts 2:38.) "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out." (Acts 3:19.) In conformity whereto, our Church also continually places repentance before pardon, or the witness of it. "He pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent, and unfeignedly believe his holy gospel." "Almighty God -- hath promised forgiveness of sins to all them, who, with hearty repentance and true faith, turn unto him." But he is a stranger even to this repentance: He hath never known a broken and a contrite heart: "The remembrance of his sins" was never "grievous unto him," nor "the burden of them intolerable." In repeating those words, he never meant what he said; he merely paid a compliment to God. And were it only from the want of this previous work of God, he hath too great reason to believe that he hath grasped a mere shadow, and never yet known the real privilege of the sons of God.

5. Again, the Scriptures describe the being born of God, which must precede the witness that we are his children, as a vast and mighty change; a change "from darkness to light," as well as "from the power of Satan unto God;" as a "passing from death unto life," a resurrection from the dead. Thus the Apostle to the Ephesians: "You hath he quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins." (Eph. 2:1.) And again, "when we were dead in sins, he hath quickened us together with Christ; and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus." (Eph. 2:5, 6.) But what knoweth he, concerning whom we now speak, of any such change as this He is altogether unacquainted with this whole matter. This is a language which he does not understand. He tells you he always was a Christian. He knows no time when he had need of such a change. By this also, if he give himself leave to think, may he know, that he is not born of the Spirit; that he has never yet known God; but has mistaken the voice of nature for the voice of God.

6. But waving the consideration of whatever he has or has not experienced in time past; by the present marks may we easily distinguish a child of God from a presumptuous self-deceiver. The Scriptures describe that joy in the Lord which accompanies the witness of his Spirit, as a humble joy; a joy that abases to the dust, that makes a pardoned sinner cry out, "I am vile! What am I, or my father's house Now mine eye seeth thee, I abhor myself in dust and ashes!" And wherever lowliness is, there is meekness, patience, gentleness, long-suffering. There is a soft, yielding spirit; a mildness and sweetness, a tenderness of soul, which words cannot express. But do these fruits attend that supposed testimony of the Spirit in a presumptuous man Just the reverse. The more confident he is of the favour of God, the more is he lifted up; the more does he exalt himself, the more haughty and assuming is his whole behaviour. The stronger witness he imagines himself to have, the more overbearing is he to all around him; the more incapable of receiving any reproof; the more impatient of contradiction. Instead of being more meek, and gentle, and teachable, more "swift to hear, and slow to speak," he is more slow to hear, and swift to speak; more unready to learn of anyone; more fiery and vehement in his temper, and eager in his conversation. Yea, perhaps, there will sometimes appear a kind of fierceness in his air, his manner of speaking, his whole deportment, as if he were just going to take the matter out of God's hands, and himself to "devour the adversaries."

7. Once more: the Scriptures teach, "This is the love of God," the sure mark thereof, "that we keep his

commandments." (1 John 5:3.) And our Lord himself saith, "He that keepeth my commandments, he it is that loveth me." (John 14:21.) Love rejoices to obey; to do, in every point whatever is acceptable to the beloved. A true lover of God hastens to do his will on earth as it is done in heaven. But is this the character of the presumptuous pretender to the love of God Nay, but his love gives him a liberty to disobey, to break, not keep, the commandments of God. Perhaps, when he was in fear of the wrath of God, he did labour to do his will. But now, looking on himself as "not under the law," he thinks he is no longer obliged to observe it. He is therefore less zealous of good works: less careful to abstain from evil; less watchful over his own heart; less jealous over his tongue. He is less earnest to deny himself, and to take up his cross daily. In a word, the whole form of his life is changed since he has fancied himself to be at liberty. He is no longer "exercising himself unto godliness;" "wrestling not only with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers," enduring hardships, "agonizing to enter in at the strait gate." No; he has found an easier way to heaven; a broad, smooth flowery path, in which he can say to his soul, "Soul, take thy ease; eat, drink, and be merry." It follows, with undeniable evidence, that he has not the true testimony of his own spirit. He cannot be conscious of having those marks which he hath not; that lowliness, meekness, and obedience: Nor yet can the Spirit of the God of truth bear witness to a lie; or testify that he is a child of God when he is manifestly a child of the devil.

8. Discover thyself, thou poor self-deceiver! -- thou who art confident of being a child of God; thou who sayest, "I have the witness in myself," and therefore defiest all thy enemies. Thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting; even in the balance of the sanctuary. The word of the Lord hath tried thy soul, and proved thee to be reprobate silver. Thou art not lowly of heart; therefore thou hast not received the Spirit of Jesus unto this day. Thou art not gentle and meek; therefore thy joy is nothing worth: It is not joy in the Lord. Thou dost not keep his commandments; therefore thou lovest him not, neither art thou partaker of the Holy Ghost. It is consequently as certain and as evident, as the Oracles of God can make it, his Spirit doth not bear witness with thy spirit that thou art a child of God. O cry unto him, that the scales may fall off thine eyes; that thou mayst know thyself as thou art known; that thou mayest receive the sentence of death in thyself, till thou hear the voice that raises the dead, saying, "Be of good cheer: Thy sins are forgiven; thy faith hath made thee whole."

9. "But how may one who has the real witness in himself distinguish it from presumption" How, I pray, do you distinguish day from night How do you distinguish light from darkness; or the light of a star, or glimmering taper, from the light of the noonday sun Is there not an inherent, obvious, essential difference between the one and the other And do you not immediately and directly perceive that difference, provided your senses are rightly disposed In like manner, there is an inherent, essential difference between spiritual light and spiritual darkness; and between the light wherewith the Sun of righteousness shines upon our heart, and that glimmering light which arises only from "sparks of our own kindling:" And this difference also is immediately and directly perceived, if our spiritual senses are rightly disposed.

10. To require a more minute and philosophical account of the manner whereby we distinguish these, and of the criteria, or intrinsic marks, whereby we know the voice of God, is to make a demand which can never be answered; no, not by one who has the deepest knowledge of God. Suppose when Paul answered before Agrippa, the wise Roman had said, "Thou talkest of hearing the voice of the Son of God. How dost thou know it was his voice By what criteria, what intrinsic marks, dost thou know the voice of God Explain to me the manner of distinguishing this from a human or angelic voice." Can you believe the Apostle himself would have once attempted to answer so idle a demand And yet, doubtless, the moment he heard that voice he knew it was the voice of God. But how he knew this,

who is able to explain Perhaps neither man nor angel.

11. To come yet closer: Suppose God were now to speak to any soul, "Thy sins are forgiven thee," -- he must be willing that soul should know his voice; otherwise he would speak in vain. And he is able to effect this; for, whenever he wills, to do is present with him. And he does effect it: That soul is absolutely assured, "this voice is the voice of God." But yet he who hath that witness in himself, cannot explain it to one who hath it not: Nor indeed is it to be expected that he should. Were there any natural medium to prove, or natural method to explain, the things of God to unexperienced men, then the natural man might discern and know the things of the Spirit of God. But this is utterly contrary to the assertion of the Apostle, that "he cannot know them, because they are spiritually discerned;" [1 Cor. 2:14] even by spiritual senses, which the natural man hath not.

12. "But how shall I know that my spiritual senses are rightly disposed" This also is a question of vast importance; for if a man mistake in this, he may run on in endless error and delusion. "And how am I assured that this is not my case; and that I do not mistake the voice of the Spirit" Even by the testimony of your own spirit; by "the answer of a good conscience toward God." [Acts 23:1] By the fruits which he hath wrought in your spirit, you shall know the testimony of the Spirit of God. Hereby you shall know, that you are in no delusion, that you have not deceived your own soul. The immediate fruits of the Spirit ruling in the heart, are "love, joy, peace, bowels of mercies, humbleness of mind, meekness, gentleness, long-suffering." [Gal. 5:22, 23] And the outward fruits are, the doing good to all men; the doing no evil to any; and the walking in the light, [1 John 1:7] -- a zealous, uniform obedience to all the commandments of God.

13. By the same fruits shall you distinguish this voice of God, from any delusion of the devil. That proud spirit cannot humble thee before God. He neither can nor would soften thy heart, and melt it first into earnest mourning after God, and then into filial love. It is not the adversary of God and man that enables thee to love thy neighbour; or to put on meekness, gentleness, patience, temperance, and the whole armour of God. [see Col. 3:12-14; Eph. 6:11] He is not divided against himself, or a destroyer of sin, his own work. No; it is none but the Son of God who cometh to "destroy the works of the devil." [1 John 3:8] As surely therefore as holiness is of God, and as sin is the work of the devil, so surely the witness thou hast in thyself is not of Satan, but of God.

14. Well then mayst thou say, "Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift!" [2 Cor. 9:15] Thanks be unto God, who giveth me to "know in whom I have believed;" [2 Tim. 1:12] who hath "sent forth the Spirit of his Son into my heart, crying, Abba, Father," [Gal. 4:6] and even now, "bearing witness with my spirit that I am a child of God!" [Rom. 8:16] And see, that not only thy lips, but thy life show forth his praise. He hath sealed thee for his own; glorify him then in thy body and thy spirit, which are his. [1 Cor. 6:20] Beloved, if thou hast this hope in thyself, purify thyself as he is pure. While thou beholdest what manner of love the Father hath given thee, that thou shouldst be called a child of God; [1 John 3:1] cleanse thyself "from all filthiness of flesh and Spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God;" [2 Cor. 7:1] and let all thy thoughts, words, and works be a spiritual sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God through Christ Jesus! [Rom. 12:1, 2]

Edited by Connie Dunn (Academic Dean, Australian Nazarene Theological College) with corrections and additions by Ryan Danker and George Lyons of Northwest Nazarene University for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology.

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