

The Witness of the Spirit

by Harmon A. Baldwin

The witness of the Spirit is the testimony of the Holy Spirit to our inner man, assuring us that all carnal tendencies are gone from the heart, and that Jesus Christ reigns there alone.

Scripture: Isaiah 1:18, Romans 8:16, 1 Corinthians 2:12, 1 John 3:24, 1 John 5:6

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Sanctification"

Description

Harmon A. Baldwin preaches about the importance of receiving the Spirit's witness to the cleansing of the heart for certainty in experiencing holiness. A failure to receive this witness leads to unsteadiness and uncertainty in one's faith journey. The witness of the Spirit is a direct revelation of the fact of inwrought holiness, accompanied by a sense of cleanness, the blood of Christ flowing over the soul, and a deep sense of abasement. Baldwin emphasizes the need for a clear, unmistakable, and positive witness from the Holy Spirit to confirm the work of sanctification in the heart.

Transcript

Upon the reception of the Spirit's witness to the cleansing of the heart depends all certainty regarding the experience of holiness. Its reception marks an epoch in our lives, and can always be pointed to as the time when the work was done. A failure to receive this witness is one great reason for so much unsteadiness and uncertainty. In the majority of cases a careful, honest investigation of one's own heart will reveal the fact that what has been called "up-and-down" experience has really sprung from the fact that no direct witness of the Spirit has ever been received. Since the witness always accompanies the work, we are forced to the conclusion that many if not the great majority of those who vacillate in this experience were never in reality cleansed.

The first thing necessary to settle in seeking this experience is that you will never stop short of the positive witness inwrought by the Holy Ghost. Endeavor to the best of your ability to comprehend the fact of the witness. You can no more comprehend the witness itself before it is given than could you comprehend the witness of justification before its reception. But you can grasp the fact that the witness will be clear, and settle it within yourself never to stop short of it.

Two things may be depended upon: 1. Anything short of the real witness must be unsatisfactory. One's experience may be wonderful, it may be glorious, it may come suddenly and flood the soul, and at the time swallow the whole being to such an extent that there will not seem to be anything lacking; but after a while, when trials come thick and fast, there will be an indefiniteness about it and such a sameness with other

blessings that have been received that the heart grows dissatisfied, and will long for some positive assurance that the work has been wrought. A sense of incompleteness will come over the soul at times that will be painful; a sense of indefiniteness will also be felt concerning the experience of perfect love which will be disappointing and oppressive; while at times, it may be, a consciousness of remaining impurity, expressing itself in word, act or motive, will disturb the soul like a horrid nightmare. Some blessing may be given, and because of this the seeker argues these feelings away as temptations, and settles back into the old rut of professing holiness without its power in the heart. 2. There is, on the other hand, a sweet, satisfying definiteness in the witness of the Spirit that is received in no other way. The blessing at the time of its reception may not be nearly so great as blessings received on former occasions, but the clear, divine testimony that the desired work of grace has been wrought in the soul fully makes up for the lack of emotion and moves the soul to thankfulness.

We may now proceed to consider what the witness of the Spirit is.

1. The witness of the Spirit may or may not be accompanied by a flood of ecstasy. In perhaps the majority of cases it is not. It is a mistake for persons to set seekers to hunting for a landslide of joy, for it may be that this will not be God's way of working. When they are seeking a good feeling they naturally seize the first blessing that is received and label it holiness, when, as Fletcher says, they may simply have their imperfections covered with a landslide of peace and joy in believing, and the old fires of carnality be still smoldering within. Remember this, Saved people get great blessings, and if you have kept clear you have had them yourself all along, and this may be an additional one given at this especial time. Certainly it will do no harm to carefully examine its characteristics. Wesley mentions this point in "Christian Perfection," where he says, "Some have much love, peace, and joy, yet have not the direct witness." Let us ask some questions: 1. Was the blessing just like those you received before? Some persons say that the blessing received in obtaining holiness is just the same as that received in justification. But this is not necessarily true. The states are different, and the work wrought is different. One is forgiveness, and the other cleansing. The blessings received during justification are testimonies to acceptance, while this is a testimony to purity. The Israelites ate manna in the wilderness, but as soon as they crossed the Jordan they ate old corn, and grapes, and honey, and oil, and drank milk. If you are really hungry for holiness, you cannot be satisfied with the manna of justification; and, while you are very thankful for all God's favors, there is something now unsatisfactory in the blessings that formerly delighted you. There is a difference, there must be a difference; not that it is given by a different person, for it is not, but in that it is received in a differently conditioned vessel, and is the evidence of a different state.

2. Is this blessing satisfying? There is something wonderfully satisfying about the blessing of holiness, if you wish to call it by that name. It stands to reason that although the blessings received during the justified life are remarkable, yet they lack a certain element of satisfactoriness. If they do not, why should additional satisfaction be sought? But in the experience of holiness God "satiates" the souls of his children. There is nothing lacking that would or could make it more perfect in the soul's eye. Now do not understand us to say that the blessing will be so great that you will desire no more, but the witness is so satisfactory that nothing more is necessary to full assurance and perfect rest. The quality is perfect, for it is Christian perfection.

(3). But this thought must be qualified, for some people's ideas of satisfaction are pitched too low, while some are too high. What is your standard of satisfaction? If it is in the definite witness to holiness, it will take that to fill the demand; but if it is just a blessing, the first stirring of your emotions will cause you to think that you have reached the summit of Christian attainment. We have talked with sinners, who

declared that they were satisfied; and with formal professors who were so "settled on their lees" that they sanctimoniously declared that they wanted no more, that they had enough religion to do them; with others who clung to their inherent depravity and were satisfied to let it remain. But if the Ultima Thule of your desires is true Christian perfection, you will not be satisfied until that goal is reached. So be sure your ideas are based upon proper conceptions of the truth before you declare that the satisfaction that comes to you is the limit of your possibilities in God.

4. Was the blessing you received accompanied by the Spirit's witness to the definite work of inwrought holiness? This is important. The blessing one receives may be great, powerful, and, in some sense satisfactory, but if it lacks this essential element, it is not the witness of purity. Visions, ecstasies, raptures, trances and various other manifestations, may be received in the justified state. Hence these are not evidences of purity. Unless the direct witness of the Spirit attests it there is no sure evidence of entire sanctification.

5. You may say, "Yes, it was a definite witness." But let us ask again, Did this witness abide? Was this presence of the Holy Comforter permanent? Or, did the edge wear off in a few days and leave you as uncertain about your standing as ever? Granted, that this may be caused by temptation, there is this difference: if you are clean, though the temptation may be severe, yet if you hold steady, you will shortly come out from under it, and, upon examination, will find that the witness is as clear as it was before the temptation came; but if it be true that your heart is unclean, the passing away of the temptation will still leave you in doubt, and you will find your supposed evidence clouded, and not even as bright as it seemed before.

Again: close, cutting truth may cause deep heart searching, but the deeper the search the clearer the real evidence will shine, for God's truth is never against his witness. The Spirit and the word agree. If you are forced to ignore truth in order to keep your evidence, the trouble is lack of the divine witness. The Comforter comes to abide. Does he abide with you, not merely in ecstasies, but in fact?

It is not well to be so hasty and over-anxious about the experience that you will call the first little stirring of your emotions holiness. Of course, if we ask a fish God will not give us a serpent. But God gives only "according to our faith." As Fletcher says, in substance, "If one deluge of sanctifying grace will purify the soul it is well, but if not we should continue to seek until it is purified." We have known persons who apparently did not have the full light God intended them to have, but who would pray earnestly for some time, and, seemingly come to the end of all they knew, when their faith would lay hold of God and a great blessing would be received. This would be immediately, or soon after, followed by additional light, a deeper plunge into God, and a greater knowledge and abhorrence of self. This would be repeated time after time, until, at last they would wade boldly into the cleansing stream and come out whole. Then do not be too hasty to claim the experience. Unless the witness of the Spirit is clear it is possible that your faith only grasps a greater measure of justifying grace than formerly. Test it by the rule of God-given certainty.

Again, though you hear, or think you hear, some voice, and even though some comforting passages of scripture impress themselves upon your mind, it does not necessarily follow that you have the witness. Passages of scripture may or may not thus come to you, and the devil is always handy, ready to whisper in your ears. There is something better than either in the direct witness of the Spirit.

We now pass to consider more particularly the positive side of the question. We would define the witness of the Spirit as the testimony of the Holy Spirit to our inner man, assuring us that all carnal tendencies are

gone from the heart, and that Jesus Christ reigns there alone.

(1) It is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Man would substitute his own spirit, and say, "Because such and such things are true in my heart I am clean." But this is too shallow. Some would substitute scripture, and say, "Because the Bible says, 'Now is the day of salvation,' etc., of course it must be done." Others would substitute plausible arguments, and think, "I have done so and so, and therefore God must have done his part." Again, others would substitute the opinions of the brethren, and say, "They think I am clean, therefore it must be true." But all such persons lean on a broken reed. The witness needed is the direct, personal testimony of the Holy Spirit himself. He does not trust his work of witnessing with us, with our neighbor, or with the scriptures, but does it himself. So, unless you come in contact with and receive the witness of the Holy Ghost, you may be sure that the work is not done, no matter how happy you may be. The Holy Ghost himself is our sanctifier and witness-bearer.

(2) It is the testimony of the Holy Ghost to our inner man. There is something too cold and dead about much of the so-called holiness of to-day. The mind reasons well of God, the tongue speaks well of the Holy Ghost, and the sensibilities are stirred by thoughts of the Comforter; but "the inner man" is still more or less carnal, and never comes in full sanctifying contact with God the Holy Ghost. While the mind staggers out blindly into the unsearchable riches of Christ, the poor heart remains behind, cold and indifferent, a millstone hanged about the neck of faith.

Two questions should now be answered by those who profess to be sanctified: First, when you were seeking, did you come in contact with that third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Ghost, and did he in his own way speak to you? Second, did he bear witness with your spirit, with your inner man, or was it some mere moving of the mind or stirring of the senses that you experienced, and which departed as soon as you left the building? Was the mighty deep of your soul broken up, and did the Spirit of God as a matter of certainty with you move on the face of its troubled waters?

(3) It is a direct revelation. The Bible is a revelation from God, but it comes to us through the medium of human utterances expressed with paper and ink. But this witness of the Spirit is a direct revelation -- an assurance conveyed immediately to the soul by the Spirit. My letter to my friend is an indirect revelation, but speaking to him my voice is more direct. God's witness, however, is more direct than either of these. I convey my ideas through the medium of my letter or my voice, but God is limited to no such means, for by his personal, divine incoming he reveals in and by himself the things that concern my soul. As the spirit of man understands the things that are in him, so now the Spirit of God causes the spirit of man to know the divine witness which the Spirit bears within him. Nothing else can be so direct, so powerful, so convincing. Our outward senses may deceive, but when the divine witness is given it is sure. They are deceived who, without having received this heavenly witness, claim the experience of full salvation. The true witness of the Spirit is from God; yea, it is God himself within the soul.

(4) But this witness is a direct revelation of a fact. It is not an indefinite stirring of the sensibilities, but God witnessing to the fact of an inwrought work of grace. It conveys one definite assurance -- that the work of holiness has been definitely wrought in the heart and continues to be an accomplished fact.

But this work of holiness to which the Spirit bears witness has two aspects -- negative and positive. Consider,

First, the negative. "The carnal tendencies are all gone." After all, this is the great thing that has been troubling the heart for so long, as the poor, frightened soul has been crying, "Oh, how I hate these lusts of

mine!" Now the great Cleanser, the Holy Ghost, the only person in the universe who can attest such a thing, says, in effect, "It is done." The soul then cries out in surprise,

"'Tis done, the great transaction's done."

There may be no searching of the soul at present to find one thing after another gone, but this one great fact assured displaces all other considerations, "My heart, which was a cage of unclean birds, is now made clean. Glory be to God."

Second, the positive aspect. Jesus Christ reigns unrivaled and alone in the heart and life. No more of self; no more stirrings of pride, impatience, jealousy, lust and all the horrid train; but Jesus Christ has taken the throne in the heart and will henceforth govern it as he wishes. All hail, thou Galilean King! Welcome to thy rightful throne. Sit thou as Lord over all. Amen. The Holy Spirit testifies to this fact in the inmost soul, and "we know that his witness is true."

It is not necessary that there should be any great stirrings of the emotions, but on the contrary the emotions that were so lately stirred to their very depths may now settle into a heavenly calm; and upon the surface of the soul's sea there may not be the rippling of a wave. The tempest has ceased. "The Master of ocean and earth and sky" uttered his voice, and, at the sound of his "Peace, be still," "immediately there was a great calm." There may be no sense of fullness, but, on the contrary, of emptiness and loss. From this comes the doctrine of two works in one, first cleansing, second filling or the baptism of fire. But the soul that is made clean is occupied by God. The conscious fullness of the Spirit that will come afterward may not be realized, but God fills the soul that is all his own, and from that very moment carnality goes, and the fire of perfect love begins to burn on the heart's altar, which need never go out. You will doubtless be more conscious of this love at certain times than at other times, but God constantly dwells in his temple, nevertheless.

Let us now pass to speak again of some of the accompaniments of this witness, always bearing in mind that these are not the witness, but that the true witness of the Spirit is an inward, divine testimony that the work is accomplished.

1. This witness may be accompanied by a flood of glory. There are numerous testimonies to this fact, although this is not the general experience. Since God chooses for reasons known to himself sometimes to accomplish his work in this way, it is all right; but you must be sure not to take your eyes from the work God has wrought in order to enjoy its blessings. There is danger of this being the case. The work of holiness is so great and so important that God wants you to see that it is he who does it, that you may henceforth give him the glory. Thank God for the blessings, but thank him more for the grace of "perfect love."

2. It may be, and perhaps generally is, accompanied by a sense of cleanness. As cleansing is that work for which we seek, It is natural that a sense of cleanness wrought by the Holy Ghost would be taken as an evidence. But this sense of cleanness is not always an evidence of entire sanctification. There is a purifying process and a certain sense of cleanness experienced by the soul which is freely justified. This is cleansing, but not entire cleansing. When the sense of cleansing accompanies the evidence of holiness it is peculiarly adapted to the circumstances, and reveals the fact that the "King's daughter is all glorious within."

3. The witness may be, and perhaps generally is, accompanied by a sense of the blood of Christ flowing over the soul. It is by merit of the shed blood applied to the believing soul by the Holy Spirit that the work of full salvation is accomplished, and it is natural to suppose that sometimes at least the evidence will be accompanied by a consciousness of this fact. Through all your soul, so lately appearing in your own eyes as a charnel house, full of all uncleanness, you feel the warm, penetrating, searching virtue of the blood, cleansing, purifying as it goes, until the whole soul glows with heavenly fire, and the last trace of coldness is gone.

"Oh, the blood, the precious blood,

That Jesus shed for me,

Upon the cross in crimson flood,

Just now by faith I see."

And not only do you now see it by faith, but your soul has come in actual contact with its sin-killing tide, and sinks before God as wax melted before the fire. Hallelujah! "Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

4. The witness may be accompanied by a sense of emptiness. This will often be the case with those who get such an overwhelming view of their inward pollutions that they seem to themselves to be filled with a loathsome disease. When carnality is destroyed they feel empty and clean, as though their souls were almost hollow, when in fact they are only

"Emptied that he might fill them,

As forth in his service they go."

In this condition souls are apt to be tempted that they never will be able to do anything again; but hold still and in God's good time he will anoint you with fresh oil and make you strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

5. The witness of the Spirit may be accompanied by a holy awe. When your soul views the work done, and realizes its immensity, the infinitude of the cost, and its far-reaching results, it sinks in awe before the holy Being who could accomplish such a wonder, or cries out in rapture, as angels might do, while glory after glory of the Almighty is unfolded before their astonished vision. You never thought of him on this wise? Ah, he has just commenced to reveal himself. Greater things will follow, if you persevere.

6. The witness will also be accompanied by a deep sense of abasement. When the soul is stripped of its pride, its self-sufficiency, of all its own works, instead of taking the flight that it was expecting, it falls as a worthless slave at the feet of its conqueror, and at the feet of all others for that matter. This sense of abasement is so opposite to what the experience of holiness is generally conceived to be that it may cause some trial of faith. But God knows just what we need, and will humble our souls till such a time as he sees that we should be exalted.

7. Or, again, this witness may be accompanied by abounding love glowing in the soul like a furnace of fire.

There are in some cases other accompaniments of the Spirit's testimony, but whether any particular one or all of them are present makes very little difference, since the real evidence of full salvation is the direct testimony of the Holy Spirit. This cannot be explained to the satisfaction of one who has never received

it, but is clear to him who has.

It will be helpful to try your supposed evidence of entire sanctification by the following tests:

1. Does it assure you of the purity of your soul? The witness of the Spirit does this, as we saw above.
2. Is it a definite testimony, or is it vague and mystifying?
3. Is it unmistakable? The true witness of the Spirit is clear and infallible.
4. Is it positive? Not in that positiveness that says, "I am clean, no matter what any one says," but in that positiveness that can stand the most searching and thorough investigation and come forth without loss.
5. Do you recognize it as God himself witnessing with your soul?
6. Does it bring a sense of completeness, a feeling that your struggles against sin and for cleansing are ended, and that the work is at last accomplished?

Once again, the real evidence is internal. It does not come with a rush and din, with noise and bluster nor with pompousness of any kind, but "in all lowliness and meekness," speaking like a "still small voice" in the inmost soul.

This witness also reaches the consciousness. Nor does it travel through the medium of the senses, the intellect, nor any other intervening thing, but directly reaches the center of being and from thence transmits the message to the intellect and sensibilities. It goes to the center of being and becomes, as it were, a part of one's self. We know it because it is the very knowledge of ourselves; and from this center of operations the Holy Spirit diffuses his sweet, holy presence through the whole being, as the odor of a fragrant perfume diffuses itself through a room.

The following, from Wesley, is clear on the witness of the Spirit to the work of entire sanctification:

Q. How do you know that you are sanctified -- saved from your inbred corruption?

A. I know it no otherwise than I know that I am justified. 'Hereby know we that we are of God [in either sense) by the Spirit that he hath given us.'

We know it by the witness and by the fruit of the Spirit. And, first, by the witness. As, when we were justified the Spirit bore witness with our spirit that our sins were forgiven, so when we were sanctified he bore witness that they were taken away. Indeed, the witness of sanctification is not always clear at first (as neither is that of justification); neither is it afterward always the same, but, like that of justification, sometimes stronger and sometimes fainter. Yea, and sometimes it is withdrawn. Yet, in general, the latter testimony of the Spirit is both as clear and steady as the former.

Q. But what need is there of it, seeing sanctification is a real change, not a relative only, like justification?

A. But is the new birth a relative change only? Is not this a real change? Therefore, if we need no witness of our sanctification, because it is a real change, for the same reason we should need none that we are born of, or are, the children of God.

Q. But does not sanctification shine by its own light?

A. And does not the new birth, too? Sometimes it does. And so does sanctification; at others it does not. In the hour of temptation Satan clouds the work of God and injects various doubts and reasonings, especially in those who have either very weak or very strong understandings. At such times there is absolutely need of that witness, without which the work of sanctification not only could not be discerned, but could not longer subsist. Were it not for this the soul could not then abide in the love of God; much less could it rejoice evermore and in everything give thanks. In these circumstances, therefore, a direct testimony that we are sanctified is necessary in the highest degree.

'But I have no witness that I am saved from sin, and yet I have no doubt of it.' Very well. As long as you have no doubt it is enough; when you have, you will need that witness.

Q. But what Scripture makes mention of any such thing or gives any reason to expect it?

A. That Scripture, 1 Cor. 2: 12, 'We have received not the spirit which is of the world, but the Spirit which is of God, that we may know the things which are freely given us of God.' Now, surely sanctification is one of 'the things which are freely given us of God.' And no possible reason can be assigned why this should not be expected when the apostle says we receive the Spirit, for this very end, 'that we may know the things which are thus freely given us.'

Is not the same thing implied in that well-known Scripture, Rom. 8: 16, 'The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God'? Does he only witness this to those who are children of God in the lowest sense? Nay, but to those also who are such in the highest sense. And does he not witness that they are such in the highest sense? What reason have we to doubt it?

What if a man were to affirm (as indeed, many do) that this witness belongs only to the highest class of Christians? Would you not answer, the apostle makes no restriction? Therefore, doubtless it belongs to all the children of God. And will not the same answer hold if any affirm that it belongs only to the lowest class?

Consider, likewise, 1 John 5: 19, 'We know that we are of God.' How? 'By the Spirit that he hath given us' (1 John 3: 24). Nay, 'hereby we know that he abideth in us.' And what ground have we, either from Scripture or reason, to exclude the witness, any more than the fruit of the Spirit from being here intended? By this then, also, we know that we are of God, and in what sense we are so. Whether we are babes, young men, or fathers, we know in the same manner.

Not that I affirm that all young men, or even fathers, have this testimony every moment; there may be intermissions of the direct testimony that they are thus born of God. But those intermissions are fewer and shorter as they grow up in Christ. And some have the testimony both of their justification and sanctification, without any intermission at all; which I presume more might have, did they walk as humbly and as closely with God as they may.

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