

## *The Spirit's Continual Witness to the Believer*

As I have explained elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> when the sinner is converted, at the point of his conversion the Spirit witnesses to him, seals him, and anoints him, thereby assuring the believer that he is, indeed, a child of God. Let me remind you of the relevant scriptures. They surely speak for themselves:

If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ... Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry: 'Abba, Father'. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory... We... have the firstfruits of the Spirit (Rom. 8:9,14-17,23).

Now it is God who... anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (2 Cor. 1:21-22).

God... has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (2 Cor. 5:5).

Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our [your] hearts, the Spirit who calls out: 'Abba, Father'. So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir (Gal. 4:6-7).

You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory... Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption (Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30).

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<sup>1</sup> See my *Assurance in The New Covenant* pp23-44; 'The Spirit's Work in Conversion' (Edocs link: David H J Gay Ministry sermonaudio.com and on christmycovenant.com).

You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth... As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit – just as it has taught you, remain in him (1 John 2:20-27).

This is how we know that he lives in us: we know it by the Spirit he gave us (1 John 3:24).

We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit (1 John 4:13).

It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth... We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son (1 John 5:6,9-11).

Nothing could be clearer. If we have been converted, the Spirit witnessed to and with us at the moment of our conversion. I dare to assert this on the authority of God's word. To those who say something like: 'Ah, but experience or the Confessions say...', I have a ready reply: We must not start with our (or others') experience and make Scripture fit that; we must begin with Scripture, and conform or change everything else – our systems, our Confessions, our practice and ourselves – to comply with the word of God.<sup>2</sup> And as the above extracts show beyond a vestige of doubt, the Spirit witnesses to every believer at the point of conversion.

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<sup>2</sup> 'When tackling this subject [as every other], we must not start with our experience and try to make Scripture fit that. Rather, we must start with Scripture, discover what that teaches, and then apply what we have learnt from God's word to our lives. Far too many teachers – not excluding some of the greatest – wrongly take the first course. Little wonder that they get themselves, and their hearers and readers, into serious difficulties' (quoted from my *Assurance* p21).

But that is far from being the end of the story. In this article I want to take this witness of the Spirit a little further. I now want to show that this witness is not a one-off experience, something done and dusted. Right from the moment of our conversion, the Spirit witnesses with our spirit, yes. But not only that. The Spirit goes on maintaining this witness throughout our entire earthly pilgrimage. It is a continual experience for us.<sup>3</sup>

How do we know this? By Paul's use of verbs: 'You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry: "Abba, Father"'. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children' (Rom. 8:15-16). We *received* (aorist tense) the Spirit at conversion (Rom. 8:15); that is, we received the Spirit as a one-off experience, with abiding effect. And it is as we *cry* (present tense, we go on crying), that the Spirit *bears witness* or *testifies* (present tense, the Spirit goes on witnessing), with us. In other words, the reception of the Spirit is an initial experience with abiding results. The Spirit resides in us, constantly carrying out his ministry within us: at conversion the Spirit removes our fear, confirms us as sons, enables us to call God our Father, and witnesses to us that we are Christ's, *and he continually goes on doing the same throughout the rest of our days*. In short, we are talking about a moment-by-moment authentication to our spirits, the Spirit assuring us, leading us to God through Christ and confirming our standing in Christ. Likewise, the Spirit seals us and anoints us, both the seal and the anointing being permanently ours, and continually ours.

And it is not only a question of the apostle's use of verbs. There is no break anywhere in Paul's statement in Romans 8:15-16, no suggestion of one. There is no break in the text, and there is no interlude between the believer's experience of the removal of his fear, his realisation that he is free to address God as his Father, his sense of sonship, and the witness of the Spirit. It is all one instantaneous and yet continuous episode, one encounter with God through Christ by the Spirit. It starts at conversion, and it abides. The Spirit deals with us in this way at the beginning, and

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<sup>3</sup> For this article, I have lightly edited my *Assurance* pp44-50.

he never stops dealing with us in this way. It is a present, not merely historical, experience for us.

Let me illustrate. While crossing the Atlantic, John Wesley, in contrast to his own sense of fear, had been deeply challenged by the courage and confidence displayed by the Moravians in the violent storm through which they had passed. On reaching Savannah, Georgia, he opened his heart to August Spangenberg, seeking his help. The Moravian responded: 'I must first ask you one or two questions'. Spangenberg wanted to know if Wesley was truly converted: 'Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit, that you are a child of God?' Wesley was stumped. 'Do you know Jesus Christ?' Spangenberg asked. Wesley replied: 'I know he is the Saviour of the world'. 'True', came the reply, 'but do you know he has saved you?' The best Wesley could say was: 'I hope he has died to save me'. Spangenberg: 'Do you know yourself?' Wesley: 'I do'. But, as Wesley later recorded in his Journal: 'I fear they were vain words'.

Spangenberg had shown Wesley that the Spirit's witness in bringing assurance was a mark of true faith. But now for the vital nuance. Pay careful attention to Spangenberg's questions (I am not playing with words): '*Have* you the witness within yourself? *Does* the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit, that you *are* a child of God?' He did not ask: '*Did* you *have* an explosive one-off experience of the witness within yourself? *Did* the Spirit of God, in some sort of dramatic experience, bear witness with your spirit, that you *were* a child of God?'<sup>4</sup>

This is of such importance, I must stress it. Some look upon assurance, the witness of the Spirit, as a striking, one-off vision,

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<sup>4</sup> George Whitefield reinforced this point when, in his letter which he wrote to John Wesley after the latter had published his sermon on predestination, he stated: 'For these five or six years, I have received [not 'I *did* receive'] the witness of the Spirit [I have made it upper case – DG]. Since then, blessed be God, I have not doubted a quarter of an hour of having a saving interest in Jesus Christ. But with grief and humble shame I do acknowledge I have fallen into sin often since that' (John Gillies: *Memoirs of The Life of... George Whitefield...*, New Haven, 1812). For more from Whitefield, see my Assurance pp87-88,121-123).

sensation, mystical experience or whatever.<sup>5</sup> D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones, for one, certainly gave that impression, advocating the kind of experience he and various others – whom he cited, on more than one occasion and at length<sup>6</sup> – had enjoyed. *But this is not what the apostles were speaking of.* According to Scripture, the witness of the Spirit is a continual experience, an ever-present witness with our spirits, the Spirit continually taking away our fears, continually enabling us to call God our Father.

This witness of the Spirit is not to be likened to having one's appendix removed. A better comparison is with the way our ductless glands work, with the way we breathe, or with the beating of our pulse, something which is going on all the time, and – when all is well – free of dramatic sensation. The illustration, I confess, is poor, but we must get away from the notion of assurance as some sort of vivid one-off explosion, a crisis, or the switching on of a light, and hold to the idea of a

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<sup>5</sup> Gospel Standard Strict Baptists are mistakenly waiting for a manifestation of their eternal justification (actual justification in eternity past) as one of the elect, this being their 'conversion' and assurance rolled in one (see my *Eternal Justification: Gospel Preaching to Sinners Marred by Hyper-Calvinism; No Safety Before Saving Faith: Septimus Sears, John Gadsby and the Gospel Standard Added Articles*). As can be seen from the Gospel Standard Articles, the witness of the Spirit is the very acme of Christian experience: 'We believe that there are various degrees of faith, as little faith and great faith ; that when a man is quickened by the blessed Spirit, he has faith given him to know and feel that he is a sinner against God, and that without a Saviour he must sink in black despair. And we further believe that such a man will be made to cry for mercy, to mourn over and on account of his sins, and, being made to feel that he has no righteousness of his own, to hunger and thirst after Christ's righteousness; being led on by the Spirit until, in the full assurance of faith, he has the Spirit's witness in his heart that his sins are for ever put away'. Unfortunately, J.H.Gosden in his definitive commentary on the articles, when commenting on the article in question (number 35), said nothing about the witness of the Spirit.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Preaching and Preachers*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1971, pp315-324; *Joy Unspeakable*, Kingsway, Eastbourne, 1984, pp105-107,112-113,125; *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 8:5-17. The Sons of God*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1974, pp315-360.

continual basking in the enjoyment of the warming rays of the sun.

If we do look upon the witness of the Spirit as some sort of mystical occurrence or dramatic encounter, we run the risk of relying on that experience. If so, we will be placing our confidence entirely in the wrong place, and on the wrong object; namely, on experience, rather than on Christ. This is a mistake of immense proportions. The Spirit bears witness to Christ – to Christ – not to himself, not to his gifts, nor to some phenomenon or incident which we look back on.

The same may be said of conversion. We must not draw our assurance from the circumstances of our conversion. As I said, assurance does not arise from the historical; it arises in the ‘today’, the present, the here and now. It’s not what happened to me on a certain date (which I may know – or think I know!). What really matters is the preciousness of Christ to me at this very moment, and the reality of my walk with him today. Peter tells us: ‘To you who believe, [the Lord Jesus Christ] is precious’ (1 Pet. 2:7). He does not say that Christ *was* precious to you on a certain date – maybe long in the past – as an experience you look back upon with fond and somewhat faded memory, *and that is all*. Christ became precious to you then, yes, but he *is* precious to you *now*. This is assurance.

There is a parallel with Christ’s ordinances: baptism and the Lord’s supper. Both are symbolic. Both speak of Christ and the believer’s relationship to him. Baptism represents and speaks of the sinner’s conversion, his union with Christ as he comes to faith.<sup>7</sup> And baptism is undergone once by the believer, and once only: he is dipped, immersed, as a representation and declaration of his union with Christ and of his being washed in the blood of Christ. But the believer observes the Lord’s supper repeatedly – ‘as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup’ (1 Cor. 11:26, NKJV) – and this speaks of his constant feeding upon Christ, his

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<sup>7</sup> Rom. 6:3-4 speaks of the believer’s actual union with Christ by spiritual baptism. Although Paul is not speaking about water baptism in that passage (see my *The Hinge in Romans 1 – 8: A critique of N.T. Wright’s view of Baptism and Conversion*), water baptism certainly represents it.

unending rest in Christ, his continual cleansing in the blood of Christ (1 John 1:9).<sup>8</sup> Thus the believer is saved at his conversion, and is being saved continually.<sup>9</sup> It takes the two ordinances to fully speak of this once-for-all and yet conscious moment-by-moment experience of salvation in, through and by Christ. That, of course, is why Christ gave both of them to us. So it is with the witness of the Spirit. The Spirit is not only given to the sinner in his conversion, and witnesses to him at that time, but, residing with the believer throughout his pilgrimage, he is always actively bearing witness with the believer, always confirming him as a child of God.

To sum up: the believer does not rest on any event – conversion or some supposed mystical experience which he may call ‘the witness of the Spirit’. No! He rests on Christ. He rests entirely and only on Christ for his justification, he rests on Christ for his assurance, he rests on Christ for his sanctification,<sup>10</sup> he rests on Christ for his liberty, he rests on Christ for his glory, he rests on Christ only and entirely for his all: ‘Christ is all’ (Col. 3:11). ‘Christ is all’ is not a slogan. For the believer, it is a reality: ‘Christ is all’.

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<sup>8</sup> This verse is written to believers, don’t forget.

<sup>9</sup> He is also saved in eternity past in God’s decree, and will be finally and utterly saved in eternity to come (see my *Eternal*).

<sup>10</sup> The sinner, on coming to faith, is united to Christ and is justified and positionally sanctified. Thus, in God’s sight, in Christ he is accounted or made righteous, free of sin and condemnation, and perfectly separated unto God. (See, for instance, 1 Cor. 1:2,30; 6:11; Eph. 5:25-27; Heb. 10:10-18; 13:12). In his Christian life, he has to work out his perfection in Christ, and he will be moved to do so by the Spirit under the direction of Scripture; this is his progressive sanctification or holiness of life. Now the believer’s progressive sanctification is intimately bound up with his positional sanctification in Christ. Consider the last three chapters of Ephesians, and see how often the apostle links his commands for godliness to the person and work of Christ. See my series: ‘Thoughts On Ephesians’ (David H J Gay Ministry sermonaudio.com). Alas, the believer’s progressive sanctification is always imperfect. He will only be absolutely sanctified in the eternal state. I will set out in my arguments on all this in my forthcoming book on sanctification.

And this is the very area in which the Spirit works. Day by day, he takes of the things of Christ, takes of the person of Christ himself, and makes Christ, and all that belongs to Christ, to be known and felt by the believer. In this way, the Spirit unceasingly enables the child of God to sense the glory of his Redeemer (John 14:16-17,26; 15:26; 16:7,13-15), and to enjoy the thought that Christ is his (John 5:11; Rom. 5:2,11; 14:17; Phil. 3:3; 1 Pet. 1:6,8, for instance). This is the witness of the Spirit. And one of the fruits of the Spirit is joy (Gal. 5:22).

But is there no danger in all this talk of the Spirit? As with every aspect of the new covenant, the answer must be: Yes, of course. Even so, unless we expose ourselves to this danger, to this accusation, we are not thinking and speaking biblically.<sup>11</sup> Some believers, however, dwelling on this danger, might raise two objections.

### ***Two objections answered***

Is there not a danger in this emphasis on the Spirit? Moreover, what will prevent a believer deluding himself that his own feelings are indeed the witness of the Spirit?

These are serious objections. In reply, we need to remember that I have drawn my doctrine that assurance comes primarily by the witness of the Spirit and not by progressive sanctification – which, I admit will seem to be excessive and strange to many today – directly from the New Testament. I have been quoting the apostles. And the New Testament always speaks of the work of the Spirit in the highest terms, and speaks unequivocally, even to the extent that no member of the new covenant needs a human teacher. Take, for example, these statements – which are true of every believer:

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<sup>11</sup> Let me explain: preaching free grace always leads to accusation of antinomianism (Rom. 6:1-2). Unless men can accuse us of it, therefore, we are not preaching the gospel properly. Likewise with assurance. Unless men can accuse us of over-emphasising the Spirit, we are not preaching biblically on the matter. We must leave ourselves open to the accusation of antinomianism. See my ‘Preparationism in New England’ (my *New-Covenant Articles: Volume Two*; the Edocs link on David H J Gay Ministry sermonaudio.com and on christmymcovenant.com).

No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying: 'Know the Lord', because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest (Heb. 8:11).

You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth... As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit – just as it has taught you, remain in him (1 John 2:20-21,27).

Clearly, these verses cannot possibly mean what they appear to be saying at first glance. After all, both John and the writer to the Hebrews were teaching as they were saying it; in fact, they were writing Scripture. But, even so, the promise still stands. And we must not water it down.

And herein lies the key to the answer to the question as to how we are to avoid the pitfall of relying on mere feeling. Do not miss my use of 'mere'. Feeling is essential! There's far too much sterility and dryness about these days! The key to all this, however, is the balance we must maintain between the Spirit and the word. It is not a question of the Spirit or the Scriptures; it is not the Spirit above the Scriptures; it is the Spirit and the Scriptures! Indeed, in the new covenant God gives all his people the Spirit, he writes his law – the gospel, Christ – on their hearts, and he, at the same time, gives them the Scriptures. The believer, therefore, is under all three: the Spirit, the law written in his heart, and the Scriptures, all three of them mutually calibrating each other,<sup>12</sup> and all three stirring the believer to assurance and progressive sanctification.

So, how do we know that believers have the witness of the Spirit? Because the Bible tells us so! How are believers able to understand, enjoy and obey the Scriptures, and, above all, find Christ in them? Because they have the gospel, Christ, written on their hearts. How do they weigh their feelings? By the law of

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<sup>12</sup> As just *one* example, link Rom. 8:1-4,9 with Gal. 6:2 and 2 Tim. 3:15-16. See my *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law*, pp154,231-232,256, for instance.

Christ in their heart and by the written word. It is the word and the Spirit – not the Spirit above the word. But neither is it the word above the Spirit! It is word and Spirit, the word written on the heart by the Spirit. So, while there is always a danger of coming down on one side or the other – the word or the Spirit – it has to be both.

So much for the objections.

Before I conclude this brief article, let me re-state the case. The Spirit witnesses to every believer, right from the moment of his conversion, and throughout the rest of his days, continually assuring him of his impeccable standing before God in Christ. Naturally, this brings him assurance and all its attendant joys.

The next question that has to be faced is this: What does the Spirit witness to us about? Indeed, is it a ‘what’?<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For my answer to these questions, see my *Assurance* p50.