



## Wesley on Romans: The Witness of the Spirit I

### Romans 8:12-25

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July 23, 2017

\*All words printed in *italics* come from Wesley's original publication.

Paul says in Romans 8:16, "The Spirit of God joins with our spirit to affirm that we are children of God." Too many people have mistaken this passage to assume it means we are children of God, even while we live in a way that does not demonstrate God's great love. People who think like this are nothing more than Christian *enthusiasts*; they tout the good news of Jesus Christ, they claim to be led by the power of the Holy Spirit, but they have never given themselves to the will of the Lord. You can try to convince them they are lacking in the witness of God's love, but in their egoistical delusions, they will all the more contend they are living in right faith, and they all they do and say is guided by the Spirit of God.

The opposite mistake can also plague the community. There are some who are nothing more than rational skeptics, who doubt anyone can really encounter the power of God through the breath of the Spirit. They argue that a person can't really know God, or can't truly determine the movement of the Spirit, outside of rash speculation. Because they are skeptical of the bold claims of Christian enthusiasts, who say they believe that the Spirit of God is working in observable and empirical ways, these "rationalistic reductionists" take a 180 degree stance and discredit any physical demonstration of the fruits of the Spirit.

But really, why must we think in either one extreme or the other? Is there not a middle course that keeps us from giving into the error of blind enthusiasm without denying the tangible gifts of God? To help us find that middle ground, let us answer, *First: What is this 'witness (or testimony) of our spirit'? What is the 'testimony of God's Spirit'? And how does [the Holy Spirit] 'bear witness with our spirit that we are children of God'?* and *Secondly: How is this joint testimony of God's Spirit and our own clearly and solidly distinguished* from the other the two: the reductionist mindset that says it's impossible to be enlightened by the Spirit, and the enthusiasts who speak too confidently of personal revelation.

First, the scripture says, we know we are children of God by our own spirit. What does that look like?

Those who argue against the enthusiasts' deep personal conviction of God's leading base their argument by saying that Paul never claims our personal experience can demonstrate God's will. They argue instead that Paul is speaking solely of the testimony of God's Spirit. Their argument is not without reason, but this text in Romans doesn't seem to write off the testimony of the individual. In fact, there are many texts in Scripture that say the experience of humanity is most vitally important to understanding God's will. The testimony of God's Spirit is not to be disregarded, but neither is the experience of the individual who is a child of God.

To be sure we aren't giving in to false testimony, we should ask, how do we know if our personal testimony is offered as testimony from a true child of God and indeed speaks of God's will, or if it instead offered like that of a Christian enthusiast, who speaks falsely of God's will? We've answered this question in previous weeks: how do you know if a person is a child of God? We know a person to be a child of God if they are studying God's Word, meditating on the Scripture, and engaging in conversations with others who know God's ways. We know a person is a child of God if they *'are led by the Spirit of God' into all holy tempers and actions.*

If you want to know your personal testimony is speaking truthfully about Scripture, about God, or about the will and love of God, you simply need to identify whether or not you have the marks of a child of God. The most rational way to determine if your spirit is witnessing as that of an enthusiast or as that of the true will of God: *It all resolves into this: those who have these marks, they are the children of God.*

And what does it mean that we have these marks? Simply, *does it appear that we love God and [that we love] our neighbor?* I don't want to come across as condescending, but let me ask a similar question, how do you know that you are alive right now? How do you know that you are in good health or without pain right this moment? Do you not have the clear capability to answer these questions? *By the same immediate consciousness you will know if your soul is alive to God.* You will know, without hesitation, if you love your neighbor as you love yourself. You will know, without question, if you love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. You may be able to lie to yourself or others about the answers to these questions, but you know the answer. *Your conscience informs you* when you take the Lord's name in vain, or when you do not keep the Sabbath holy, or when you do not honor your father or mother, or when you do as you should not do.

**This is what Paul means when he says the *'testimony of our own spirit'* confirms for us that we are children of God.** God has called us to be *holy of heart, and holy in outward conversation.* It is the Word of God that has instilled in us a *loving heart toward God and toward all [of humanity],* inviting us to embrace *every child with earnest, tender affection, so as to be ready to lay down our life for our brother [or sister, just] as Christ laid down his life for us.* The testimony of our spirit is a holy consciousness that is conformed to the Spirit of God and to the image of the Son, that we might walk before the Lord *in justice, mercy, and truth, doing the things which are pleasing in his sight.*

That is the testimony of **our** spirit. But what is the *testimony of God's Spirit which is superadded to and conjoined with this?* It is truly difficult to find the words to explain the things of God for our human understanding. *Perhaps one might say, the testimony of the Spirit [of God] is an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly affirms that one is a child of God.* It is the deep conviction that Christ has loved you, and that because of Christ, you are reconciled to God.

It's understated to say that for the testimony of our spirit to confirm our being a child of God, we must first be holy of heart and holy in life. *One must love God before we can be holy at all*, for our love for God is the foundation of all holiness. But, we cannot love God until we know that God loves us. *'We love him, because he first loved us.'* In the same way, we cannot know the pardoning love of God until the Spirit of God witnesses the great mercy of the Lord to our spirit. That is, the testimony of the Spirit of God, that which confirms the love of God in the pardoning act of Christ, precedes our *inward consciousness thereof, or the 'testimony of our spirit'* toward God's love.

When the Spirit of God bears witness to our spirit, we are assured that the Son of God has loved us, has redeemed us, has freed us, has made us one again with the Lord, and our response is then to love God, and for the sake of the Lord, to love our neighbor. Following the joining of our spirit with the Spirit of God, the two join together in one testimony confirming that we are children of God. For there is but one response to the confirmation of God's great love for us, we respond by offering love.

*[The one] that now loves God – that delights and rejoices in [God] with a humble joy, a holy delight, and an obedient love – is a child of God*, confirmed by both the testimony of the Holy Spirit and of our own spirit.

The second thing I said we would consider is how does this joint testimony of God's Spirit and our spirit stand apart from *the presumption of the natural mind*? That is, it is too easy for us to think ourselves capable of our own salvation? Because that's just not possible. It takes the act of divine sovereignty to make salvation possible. But we shouldn't overlook, as we have considered in recent weeks, that salvation is not an act of divine coercion. This cooperation and joint work of grace and freedom is quite different from the assumptions of the natural mind of humanity.

So let us consider the distinguishable marks of the Holy Spirit that *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 the believer*. If someone presumes themselves to be a child of God, but has never known these clear, obvious, and necessary marks, they are nothing shy of delusional. The Scriptures name these are the clear and obvious marks that precede, accompany, and follow the gift of the Spirit.

First, *the Scripture describes repentance, or conviction of sin, as constantly going before the witness of pardon*. Acts 3:19 says, "Repent, and turn to God, that your sins may be forgiven." One cannot have an authentic belief in their being a child of God if they have never acknowledged that there is sin in their life for which repentance is necessary. If someone believes they have never done wrong, if someone thinks they are perfectly pure in thought and deed, then they have never known the true love of God. "Those who experience in themselves a syndrome of continual resistance to repentance still await the joy of the shared witness of the Spirit with our spirits."<sup>i</sup>

Second, the Scriptures describe that being born of God, we must have experienced a mighty change, having gone from darkness to light, from death to life, from the powers of evil to the powers of love. Ephesians 2:5 reads, "Even when we were dead through our trespasses, by grace you have been saved, and made alive together with Christ." One who cannot speak of such a change does not understand the great love of God. One who says they are a child of God, but who cannot point to the life giving love of the joint testimony of the Spirit of God with our spirit is a *presumptuous self-deceiver*.

Third, the Scriptures teach that the love of God is marked by the keeping of the commandments. In 1 John 5:3, the Apostles writes, "For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments." True love for the Lord God rejoices to do what is acceptable to Christ. But this is not the behavior of a presumptuous pretender. They feel liberty to break, disobey, and rebel against the commandments of God. There is undeniable evidence that a person has not the true testimony of their own spirit, nor do they have the Spirit of the God of truth to bear a witness on their behalf, if they are not living into the call of God in Scripture to be faithful in following the law of the Lord.

You can argue with one another whether or not these marks are present in your life or in their life. But that would be a waste of your time. What it all comes down to is this, how would you answer for yourself: how do you distinguish the truth of your witness for God from a presumptuous false witness? And again, not to be coy, but it's rather simple. It's like asking, *how do you distinguish day from night? How do you distinguish light from darkness?* Just as you can so easily tell the difference between light and dark through your natural senses, so too, *there is an inherent, essential difference between spiritual light and spiritual darkness*. This difference is most easily perceived, *if our spiritual senses are rightly disposed*.

It would be like asking someone, how do you know the voice you heard was the voice of God? Imagine if you will when the Apostle Paul went before the Roman Governor on trial, and the governor said, "Paul, you claim to have heard to voice of God. How do you know it was the voice of God? Could it not have been the voice of a human? *By what criteria, what intrinsic marks*, distinguish what you heard to be nothing other than the voice of God?" I can't even imagine that Paul would have attempted to answer the governor, but I believe Paul would have had no less faith that he had heard the voice of the Lord.

Suppose you today were to hear the voice of God speaking to you. How would you know, without question, that the voice you heard was that of the Lord? I've had many people ask that question of me before. I tell you, when the Lord speaks, there is little question who is speaking. When God speaks, for the soul that has belief in and the knowledge of God's love, there is nothing but assurance in whose voice is speaking.

Because you asked, I'll tell you: here's how you know you've heard the voice of God in the testimony of the Spirit: you will know that you have not been deceived by your own soul, and you'll know that you are not delusional, because the voice of God will follow the fruits of the Spirit. *The fruits of the Spirit ruling in the heart are 'love, joy, and peace'; 'bowels of mercies,*

*humbleness of mind, meekness, gentleness, and long-suffering.’ The outward fruits are the doing good to all [humanity], the doing no evil to any [person], and the walking in the light.*

By these fruits you will be able to distinguish the voice of God from the delusional voice of all others. The voice of God will never call for anything but for the witness of your life to fall in line with the witness of the life of Christ, which offers new life through eternal love to all. The will of God is for humanity, for each of us, to acknowledge that we are one in the Spirit of God, which seeks to make manifest through our lives the great love of God to all people.

One need not be a Christian enthusiast who tries to claim what hasn't been revealed, nor does one need to be a rational reductionist who says the voice of God does not speak to individuals. When you know that the Spirit of God and your own spirit offer the testimony of God's great love, then say to God, *'Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift!' Thanks be unto God who [gives me the ability] to 'know in whom I [believe]'; who 'has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into my heart ... and even now [bears] witness with my spirit that I am a child of God!'* Friends, do not be delusional, do not think yourself more capable than you have been created, but rejoice in the Spirit of God, which offers the ability to rejoice in being claimed by God as a child of the Risen Lord. And let all that you do provide witness to the glory of the King, that in all your thoughts, words, and works, you may live a life that is holy and acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. That in all, through all, and above all the great love of God may be known by all. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Thomas C. Oden. *John Wesley's Teachings: Volume 2, Christ and Salvation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012.