

XIII *The Inward Testimony of the Holy Spirit*

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

(ROMANS 8:16)

Earlier I dealt with the previous verses in Romans 8 which speak of being led by the Holy Spirit. We noted that this leadership is given by the Spirit in the way of the means of grace, through the preaching of the Gospel and the use of the sacraments, and also through the work of the office bearers and the communion of the church. Of course, we may not restrict the leading of the Spirit to these means, for there is also his omnipotence and providence, but we certainly do appreciate what God gives us in the means of grace.

The question, however, still comes up if there is not a direct, immediate working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. In the above-quoted passage we read about the fact that the Spirit himself testifies with our spirit.... How are we to understand this testifying or testimony? Does it appear from this text that this testifying is something beyond or besides the Word or the preaching of the Word? It seems to be some *inward* testimony, since the Holy Spirit testifies with *our* spirit. Does this indicate that some conscious experience takes place within us? It would be rather strange if the Holy Spirit testified with our Spirit, and we did not notice this or experience it.

Experiential?

Do we read here about what some have called the *experience* of faith, or the experiential aspect of faith? It has been said that the experiential side

of faith is not stressed enough (if at all) in many Reformed churches. We sometimes hear that in Reformed preaching there's often an element missing, and that is the emphasis on the inward working of the Holy Spirit. We should be sensitive to this criticism.

If we are controlled by the Spirit (verse 9), if the Spirit of Christ lives in us (verse 11), and if we have received the Spirit of sonship, then certainly we must have some experience of this. These things cannot happen without us noticing them, and therefore Paul can write that the Spirit himself witnesses with our Spirit.

We may say that the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit assures us that we are children of God. This testimony is not any new information but it is a true confirmation of what we have embraced by faith.

Testifying

We must be clear from the start when we speak of “the testimony of the Holy Spirit,” that we are not speaking of something that is totally new, that Paul has not referred to earlier in this letter. It now comes out more clearly and powerfully, and there is a reason for that, but the matter itself is not new.

Our Lord Jesus in his farewell conversation with his disciples already spoke about the testifying of the Holy Spirit: he will testify about me (John 15:26). The Spirit is the Spirit of *testimony*. He officially witnesses that something is true and credible, and therefore it must be accepted.

In John 15 there is a noteworthy connection: the Spirit comes to dwell in the disciples and testifies to them about Jesus, and this leads the disciples, in turn, also to testify about Jesus. So whatever it is, this inward testimony of the Spirit is evidenced by external testifying in mission and evangelism. This stands to reason. How can we have the Spirit testifying within us, and we do not speak of it to others?

The Spirit testifies

Before we go back to Romans 8, let us at this point look closer at 1 John 5. In verse 1 John writes that everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God. It is the Lord Jesus who came by “water and blood,” and this refers both to Christ's baptism and his crucifixion and death. Christ's entire public ministry (from baptism to death) was one of intense suffering. John repeats the element of the “blood” because it emphasizes that Jesus really died and in a terrible manner.

Then we read again (verse 6) about the Spirit: it is the Spirit who *testifies*, because the Spirit is the truth. Almost the same verb is used as in the passage we are examining in Romans 8. The Spirit testifies. Testifying is apparently a prime work of the Holy Spirit.

A few verses later we read that the testimony of the Spirit is the testimony of *God*. And the testimony of God is greater than that of anyone else. John continues in verse 10: anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony *in his heart*. Consider also verse 11: and this is the testimony, God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.

The Spirit of testimony

It is clear from all these passages that the Spirit is the Spirit of testimony, and that this testimony is the testimony of God. This testimony is true and reliable, and must be believed by all. Whoever rejects it, calls God a liar.

The testimony of the Father and the Spirit is that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and in him is eternal life. We see here again something of the unity in the Trinity.

There are many things that testify to the fact that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah given by the LORD. There are the words of Scripture. There are Jesus' own teachings. There are the facts of his life and death, notably his resurrection and ascension. There is enough evidence to clinch the case, as it were, but the greatest evidence, the most credible testimony is given by the Holy Spirit himself. All those other things cannot really convince anyone, but the Spirit's testimony, in and through these things also, completes the others and renders them fully trustworthy.

The Spirit testifies. He is an expert witness, so to speak. He is the most credible witness of all because he has outstanding, perfect credentials. He presents all the evidence – and also examines the evidence given by others – and he says: yes, this is true indeed. It is this testimony of the Holy Spirit that convinces everyone of the *truth* of the matter.

True and factual

Sometimes in an important trial or court case, everything hinges on the testimony of *one* crucial witness who has seen all and can tie all together. The defense lawyers try to get at this witness, to confuse him, to catch him in contradictions, and so to discredit the witness. If you can discredit the main witness, you stand a good chance of getting your client off the hook.

The Holy Spirit is the prime witness. He testifies that Jesus is indeed the Christ, who has paid for all our sins by his death, and who is now raised in glory and lives in heaven. The Holy Spirit says to all: this is exactly how it went and how it is. So the Holy Spirit testifies *about God*: he tells us exactly what God had in mind in the life and death of Jesus Christ, to redeem us from our sins, to deliver us from slavery, and to make us again children of God. The Holy Spirit testifies that all this is absolutely *true and factual*, so that everyone has to believe and accept it. This is one witness whom no accuser can rattle or disprove. No one can get around the power and the truth of this testimony.

Convince and convict

While we are on the subject of testimony or witness, I mention as a side note that in the *Belgic Confession* the work of the Holy Spirit in this respect is also mentioned. Let's look at Article 5¹⁵ about the authority of Scripture. We confess there that we believe without a doubt all things contained in the Bible. Why do we believe this? It says, "...not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but especially because the *Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts* that they are from God...." The Holy Spirit witnesses of the truth of the Bible in our hearts. How does he do that?

Meanwhile it becomes clear from Scripture that the prime work of the Holy Spirit is *witnessing and testifying to the Truth*. In this way the Holy Spirit also *convinces and convicts*. Only the Truth is convincing and only the Truth will set you free. The Holy Spirit does this so that there is no doubt left whatsoever in our minds and hearts that the Bible is true and Jesus is our Savior. Therefore we believe in him, are saved by him, and God is our Father. All this rests on the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

No new information

We have not yet considered how the Spirit testifies *with our spirit*, but that can be done only in a proper manner when we realize on the basis of what has been said thus far that the Spirit really does not give any *new* information. Sure, he is the Spirit of *revelation*, and he has revealed all things that we need to know for our salvation in the Bible. The truth is given in all

¹⁵ *Book of Praise*, page 443.

that is written by the prophets and the apostles, and we now neither need nor receive new information.

Jesus said: [the Spirit] will glorify me. He will take what is mine – what I have earned – and will give it to you. There’s nothing new here that has never been said before. This is now especially true in this age in which God’s work of revelation has been fully completed. There is no new information. It’s back to the cross every day again.

I think that this is important for our understanding of the work of the Spirit. There are those who teach that revelation still continues today, and that new messages are received by some internal process. Some think of dreams, for they believe that God still communicates sometimes by extraordinary means.

This would happen especially on the mission field where the added testifying of the Spirit, above and beyond the preaching of the Gospel, may be required to convince people. Perhaps events occur that are unusual or even miraculous. But this is not revelation.

Pre-scriptural revelation?

I came across the term “pre-scriptural revelation.” This term sounds impressive, but it is utter nonsense. It conflicts with what we know of the testimony of the Spirit. There is today no new or pre- or extra revelation. There is in terms of revelation nothing “pre-scriptural.” It’s simply a wrong and dangerous use of the word revelation which only furthers the erroneous claim that God reveals himself (today still) outside of the Holy Scriptures.

There are those who suggest that God by the Holy Spirit must first prepare the soil so that the seed can be taken up by the soil. A fitting reference here, they say, is the parable of the seed that falls on rocky soil, on soil with weeds, and in good soil. The soil is then made good by “pre-scriptural revelation.”

But let us not get mixed up between the soil *and the seed*. The seed, the Word that is revealed, is in all cases *the same*. The soil is different, indeed, and one must understand the parable in its context and entirety to understand the differences in the soil and what these mean, but let us not be confused about the seed: everywhere the same seed was sown. There is no pre-scriptural revelation, no message behind the words, and no text between the lines.

The testimony of the Spirit is not new information, for the Holy Spirit directs us always to the *given* information. Only the Word of God as revealed in the Scriptures is normative. The Spirit brings this normative word

to us, confronts us with its powerful truth, and then proclaims by it: believe and be saved; reject it, and remain condemned.

Confirming, not informing

Therefore we can only go in one direction here. The testimony of the Holy Spirit *confirms* the testimony and evidence given in the Word. When the Belgic Confession speaks about the fact that “the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that [the Scriptures] are from God,” this is God’s sovereign and powerful *confirming* to us in our hearts that God’s Word is *true* and fully sure. Confirming is something quite different than informing. It is very important that we appreciate this difference.

The Spirit witnesses in our hearts. As we are reading Scripture and meditating on it, or listening to it being read and expounded, the Holy Spirit by that very Word convinces us deep in our hearts that what it says, gives and demands, is *true*, not just true in general or in a scientific sense, but true for the reader or hearer.

When I read the Bible I know deep in my heart that it is true. It is true for me personally as well. Every single word is true. I do not doubt the truth of what it says, not once, not ever. I may not always understand each and every sentence or section, but that’s another matter. It is absolutely and completely true. This is not my own conviction, for by nature I would have rejected the Word, like so many others do, but this is the convincing of God, the witness of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit

This is also how we now understand what is written in Romans 8:16: the Spirit *himself* testifies... Notice the word himself. There is in the original some emphasis on this word himself. Paul is at this point not writing to people who do not believe, and who are objects of mission or evangelism, but he is writing to believers about their joy and certainty. He then writes: it is not because we have all kinds of wonderful feelings that we believe. The Spirit does not necessarily give you goose bumps. Faith is not some kind of a mid-way thrill. Do you know what really happens? The Spirit himself – and no one else, not any human being, that’s for sure – testifies *with our spirit!*

Please note that it does not say here that the Holy Spirit testifies *in* our spirit or *to* our spirit, but *with* our spirit. We are here not dealing with people who are in the process of coming to faith, or must still believe, but we are

learning about people who already believe and whose faith must be confirmed and strengthened.

How does this strengthening take place? It happens in a very close bond with the Holy Spirit. We testify that we are God's children. We do this by faith in response to God's Word. Somebody may ask: are you sure? Satan may accuse us, and say: you are not. Our own consciences may testify against us: are you really? But my spirit says: Yes, I am. Despite all, through all, I may cling to Jesus Christ, and I seek cleansing and renewal in him alone.

This is how the Holy Spirit himself *testifies with our spirit*. The Holy Scriptures are applied to us. There is a deep, inner conviction, calm, peace, and love that knows one thing for sure: I am a child of God.

We need confirmation

I emphasized that the testimony of the Spirit does not give anything new. It is not something that I now am convinced of for the first time. It is a confirmation that Scripture is true for me. I badly need this confirmation, too.

I had to think of what is sometimes said when we plan a trip. We need to have our flight *confirmed*. We have the ticket, the seat is ours, and the reservation has been registered. The arrangement is legal and valid. Yet even then, when we have the tickets, some hours prior to the flight itself, we phone the airline company, just to make sure, and we have our trip confirmed. I am booked, am I not?

I have traveled often, and then you come to the point that you do not bother always to confirm the flight. You take your reservation for granted. But it does leave you with a little uneasiness: maybe I should have had it confirmed. In some places you simply have to get your flight confirmed or you won't get off the ground.

When it comes to this most important matter of all, whether I am a child of God, I need *confirmation*. I have to know for sure. I cannot live in uncertainty on this point. I cannot function without being a child of God. For then I fall to pieces.

Here's where the Spirit comes in. Now we have to backtrack one verse. The Spirit is not a spirit that makes me a slave again to *fear*, it says, the fear that I am condemned by my sins and weaknesses, that I might lose my salvation through misdeeds of the flesh, and that the law of God will crush me. What does the Spirit do? He is the Spirit of *sonship* who assures us that we are God's children, and leads us again to the Father.

It says in verse 15 (end): and *by him* (the Spirit of sonship) we cry ABBA, Father! Here I am, struggling with my obligations, knowing that I am not worthy, have not kept God's law as I should have, and I fear sometimes that God will reject me, but when I feel that way, the Spirit comes into action, and confirms: you are God's child, come let us together go to the Father. And I cry ABBA, Father. Paul uses the verb *to cry*, and that is not necessarily a loud screaming, but it is a sincere pleading that comes deep from the heart, ABBA, oh my Father, I cannot live without you, do not cast me away, cover my sins, and show me your grace.

In and by that prayer the Spirit works the assurance of faith. He testifies because he knows the truth. He testifies with my spirit, which does believe but is so weak and failing. He testifies with my spirit, strengthens it and fills it with God's love. He focuses my faltering spirit on Jesus' grace, calms it with his fellowship, and I am convinced again that I am a child of God. It is confirmed.

Incredible peace

Then there is this incredible peace in which we rejoice that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). Then there is this testimony (I John 5:11): God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. The storm is stilled, I am where peaceful streams are gently flowing (Psalm 23). If this is called experiential, let's have it, indeed.

Notice also that it says: the Spirit of sonship, and by him *we* cry, Abba, Father. The word "we" means you and me and all of us. It is not an experience unique to one Christian. It is not something that God gives only to certain members, but to *all*. Let us beware here of haughty individualism. We cry. We are part of the church. Ephesians 4:4, 5: there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all. We cry. We do it sometimes even *together* in communal prayer in the worship services. We cry out, loud and clear, and without fear: Abba, Father! He is near. Paul writes about it in terms that the Romans, too, can say: we know what you are talking about.

We are God's *children*, it says in verse 15. In the preceding verse 14 it says sons. We looked at this in the previous chapter and said that the word sons also includes the daughters. Let me now add that the word son is a more formal way of speaking, while the word child is more intimate. It is a close bond: *Abba, my Father. Yes, my child*. It emphasizes that God himself brought us forth, gave us birth and rebirth, life and eternal life. This life is

in his Son Jesus Christ. We can always flee to him and experience the tenderness of his mercy. He calls me his child. I call him my Father. And I feel I have come home again.

Ongoing testimony

Allow me one last remark in this connection. The verb to testify is in the present tense. It indicates that this testimony is *ongoing*. The Spirit constantly is working in us prayer and leading us to conviction through prayer. It is not a one-time event, as some would have it, but it continues throughout our whole life. He abides with us forever, and he always works in us the knowledge that we are God's children.

We need this experience throughout this difficult life with all its ups-and-downs. We cannot walk one day in faith without the Holy Spirit. Every evening as I review the day's events, I may say through the Spirit of sonship: Abba, Father! Then I can rest in the love of God, in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. I can face another day.