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THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT
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DEDICATION

This booklet is dedicated to the people of the
South Park Church
whose love, prayers and support made possible both
the writing and publishing of it.

-- R. E. Carroll --

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ON THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

"Christian Assurance is a firm persuasion or conviction of our being in a state of salvation. The early Methodists strongly insisted upon this conviction as essential to a Christian experience, and maintained it was the privilege of every true believer.... In no point did the early Methodists differ so widely from those around them as in insisting upon this experience. And it was this which gave life and power to their ministrations. They had personally experienced this gracious state, and were living in its constant enjoyment, and they testified frequently and forcibly of the peace and joy which accompanied it, At that period of time, the doctrine of assurance was not generally preached in other pulpits, and many ministers, as well as private Christians, denied the possibility

of its attainment; yet it was by no means a new doctrine. Mr. Wesley remarks: "I apprehend that the whole Christian church in the first centuries enjoyed it, for though we have few points of doctrine explicitly taught in the small remains of the ante-Nicene fathers, yet I think none that carefully read Clemens, Romanus, Ignatius, Polycarp, Origen, or any other of them, can doubt whether either the writer himself possessed it, or all whom he mentions as real Christians: and I readily conceive . . . that all Reformed churches in Europe did once believe 'every true Christian has the divine evidence of his being in favor of God.' I know likewise that Luther, Melancthon, and many others, if not all, of the Reformers, frequently and strongly asserted, that every believer is conscious of his own acceptance with God, and that by a supernatural evidence." [1]

We may well accept the statement of the Cyclopaedia of Methodism that the doctrine of assurance was not generally preached in other than Methodist pulpits in the days of early Methodism. We may also be quite assured that although there were some who experienced and taught this doctrine from the days of the early church right down to the days of Wesley, yet there were few, if any, who taught it so clearly. Luther and Calvin taught a doctrine of assurance but they did not attain to the clearness of personal assurance that Wesley taught. Arminius seemed to come closer to the teaching of Wesley. "Present pardon from sin and divine acceptance, rather than eternal salvation, was by Arminius understood to be the subject of the witness of the Spirit. Arminius was among the first to take this position." [2]

The influence of William Law on Wesley is well known, yet Benner states that there does not appear to be anything in Law that influenced Wesley in his development of the doctrine of the witness of the Spirit. [3] Zinzendorf believed in and preached a doctrine of assurance although he did not call it the "witness of the Spirit." [4]

Thomas Aquinas thought that Christians sometimes had this assurance but that such cases were few and that Christians generally were uncertain of their salvation.

An entry of Wesley's journal further illustrates the fact that this doctrine of Christian assurance was both little understood and little known and preached. Under date of Monday, September 3, 1739 he wrote: "I talked largely with my mother, who told me that, till a short time since, she had scarce heard such a thing mentioned, as the having forgiveness of sins now, or God's Spirit bearing witness with our spirit: much less did she imagine that this was the common privilege of all true believers. 'Therefore,' said she, 'I never durst ask for it myself. But two or three weeks ago, while my son Hall was pronouncing those words in delivering the cup to me, 'The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee;' the words struck through my heart, and I knew God for Christ's sake had forgiven me all my sins.'

"I asked whether her father (Dr. Annesley) had not the same faith, and, whether she had not heard him preach it to others. She answered, he had it himself; and declared, a little before his death, that for more than forty years he had no darkness, no fear, no doubt at all of his being 'accepted in the Beloved.' But that, nevertheless, she did not remember to have heard him preach, no not once, explicitly upon it: whence she supposed he also looked upon it as the peculiar blessing of a few; not as promised to all the people of God."

That this doctrine was believed by many is also clear from the Westminster Confession which speaks in almost Wesleyan language and is quoted by the Cyclopaedia of Methodism in the article on Christian Assurance. ". . . such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity . . . may in this life be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace . . . the testimony of the spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirit that we are the children of God. . . ." [5]

Although the doctrine of Christian assurance was known long before Wesley's day and was experienced by some and taught by them with more or less clearness, yet, it seems that very few believed it to be a common privilege of Christians. The Lord brought this truth to light through His gracious dealings with John Wesley.

The light on this precious doctrine of Christian assurance has shone more brightly ever since the night of John Wesley's Aldersgate experience. It was May 24, 1738. He had been seeking the face of the Lord but with "strange indifference, dullness, and coldness." On that morning he had opened his New Testament to the promise in II Peter 1:4. It was much impressed on him and a while later he felt that God spoke to him: "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God."

His journal records his heart-warming experience that night. "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

Wesley was thirty-five years old at the time of his Aldersgate experience. He then began a long ministry of over fifty years. The doctrine of Christian assurance that he taught and preached did not basically change in that long ministry of over half a century.

The doctrine of assurance, while taught by many before Wesley, took some forms that were much different than the way Wesley taught it. With some it meant assurance of the truth and certainty of the gospel record. With others it meant the assurance of final salvation. Many taught that it was the comfort derived from one's own persuasion that he had met God's requirements and had the fruit of a Christian manifested in his life.

What is this assurance that Wesley taught?

Wesley strongly presents his teaching on Christian assurance in his standard sermons. The three sermons that are his statement on this doctrine are: The Witness of the Spirit (Discourse I), The Witness of the Spirit (Discourse II) -- both on the text Romans 8:16 -- and The Witness of our Own Spirit with the text II Corinthians 1:12.

Wesley taught that there is an assurance that may be called the testimony of our own conscience. His sermon on "The Witness of our own Spirit," based on the text II Corinthians 1:12, gives his views on this phase of Christian assurance. He describes a testimony of one who enjoys this assurance: "I rejoice, yea, and will rejoice, because my conscience beareth me witness in the Holy Ghost, by the light He continually pours in upon it, that I walk worthy of the vocation

wherewith I am called; that I abstain from all appearance of evil . . . that I follow my Lord in all my steps, and do what is acceptable in His sight." [6] Many, both in Wesley's day and in ours, accepted and taught this as Christian assurance and all there was of Christian assurance.

Wesley and his co-laborers and followers teach also a stronger view of Christian assurance. This is that there is in addition to the witness of one's own spirit the further witness of the Holy Spirit to man's spirit that he is forgiven and adopted into the family of God. This "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." [7]

In the first discourse Wesley presents a logical and a scriptural argument that needs to be emphasized more today in our preaching and in our dealing with souls. "This testimony of the Spirit of God must needs, in the very nature of things, be antecedent to the testimony of our own spirit. . . . 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." [8]

(This testimony of the Spirit cannot be explained.) "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." [9] Although it cannot be explained yet there is no need to be deceived in this matter. Should an honest soul question whether or not he truly enjoys the witness of the Spirit there are marks whereby he may know that he is not deceived nor presuming.

"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 a glimmering taper, from the light of the noonday sun?" [10] He goes on to list those marks that convince the soul that his assurance is truly the witness of the Spirit: humble joy, a yielding spirit, a mildness and sweetness, a tenderness of soul, a keeping of His commandments, the fruits of the Spirit. "To require a more minute and philosophical account of the manner whereby we distinguish these 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." [11]

We may thus sum up Wesley's teaching on the witness of the Spirit.

1. There is an indirect witness that we are the children of God. This is nearly the same as the testimony of a good conscience; it is the witness of our own spirit, although not without the aid of the Holy Spirit. It is a conclusion drawn from the Word of God, from our own experience and from the obvious marks of a Christian life. This witness is taught by many; it is quite generally accepted as the whole of Christian assurance.

2. There is also a direct witness of the Spirit of God with, or to, our spirit that we are the children of God. This is not so clearly or commonly taught -- either in our day or in Wesley's.

3. This direct witness of the Spirit is necessary before we can know that He loved us and so, of necessity, before we can love Him "because He first loved us." We cannot know His pardoning love until His Spirit witnesses it to our spirit.

4. This direct witness of the Spirit cannot be explained. The manner of how God witnesses to the soul we cannot know; the fact we can know.

5. The assurance that we are not mistaken in the witness of the Spirit is by the Scriptural marks and Christian fruits and graces that attend it.

6. This witness of the Spirit can be lost by inward or outward sin; by anything that grieves the Holy Spirit.

7. God gives two witnesses that we may be assured that we are not mistaken. There is the Spirit-wrought witness of our own spirit and the direct witness of God's Spirit that we are the children of God.

8. It is very important that we have this direct witness of the Spirit. "You or I may be tried in such a manner, and so may any other child of God, that it will be impossible for us to keep our filial confidence in God, without the direct witness of His Spirit." [12]

9. "Let none ever presume to rest in any supposed testimony of the Spirit, which is separate from the fruit of it. If the Spirit of God does really testify that we are children of God, the immediate consequence will be the fruit of the Spirit. . . . And however this fruit may be clouded for a while, during the time of strong temptation . . . while Satan is sifting . . . yet the substantial part of it remains, even under the thickest cloud." [13a]

10. "Let none rest in any supposed fruit of the Spirit without the witness. There may be foretastes of joy, of peace, of love, and those not delusive, but really from God, long before we have the witness in ourselves . . . and consequently before we have a testimony of our acceptance: but it is by no means advisable to rest here; it is at the peril of our souls if we do. If we are wise, we shall be continually crying to God, until His Spirit cry in our heart, Abba, Father!" [13b]

11. There may be a loss of joy under severe trial and this may apparently cloud the witness of the Spirit, but God will restore the joy along with the other fruits of the Spirit if the soul remains true.

The doctrine of assurance comes through strong and clear in the hymns of Methodism. No doubt the use of such hymns helped to keep ever in mind the possibility and privilege of assurance of acceptance with God.

In the great hymn, "Arise, My Soul, Arise" Charles Wesley powerfully and beautifully sings of Christian assurance.

The Father hears Him pray,
His dear anointed One:

He cannot turn away
The presence of His Son:
His Spirit answers to the blood,
And tells me I am born of God.

My God is reconciled;
His pardoning voice I hear:
He owns me for His child;
I can no longer fear:
With confidence I now draw nigh,
And, "Father, Abba, Father," cry. [14]

And again:

How can a sinner know
His sins on earth forgiven?
How can my gracious Saviour show
My name inscribed in heaven?

What we have felt and seen
With confidence we tell;
And publish to the sons of men
The signs infallible.

We who in Christ believe
That he for us hath died,
We all his unknown peace, receive,
And feel his blood applied. [15]

Others besides Charles Wesley also sang of that assurance that means so much to the heart.
Philip Doddridge is one of these:

Cheered by that witness from on high,
Unwavering I believe;
And, "Abba, Father," humbly cry:
Nor can the sign deceive. [16]

Another is Augustus Hillhouse:

Trembling before thine awful throne,
O Lord, in dust my sins I own;
Justice and mercy for my life
Contend; O smile, and heal the strife.

The Saviour smiles; upon my soul
New tides of hope tumultuous roll;

His voice proclaims my pardon found,
Seraphic transport wings the sound. [17]

Is this a Scriptural doctrine?

The Old Testament has foregleams of a teaching of assurance. In the Psalms we read: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me. . . ." (Ps. 23:4). "Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear" (Ps. 27:3). "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear. . . ." (Ps. 46:1, 2). Isaiah also speaks of an assurance of God's favor: ". . . . thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me. Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid. . . ." (Isa. 12:1, 2). "And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance for ever. " (Isa. 32:17).

The doctrine of Christian assurance runs strongly through the New Testament. John declares that his purpose in writing his gospel was "that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name " (Jn. 21:31). Luke wrote his gospel "That thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed" (Lk. 1:4).

Paul described justification as a state in which we have peace with God and access into His presence and such an assurance that we rejoice in the midst of tribulations (Romans 5:1-5). This experience of justification has for one of its concomitants that assurance that takes away the spirit of bondage and gives a Spirit of adoption whereby we cry, Abba Father (Romans 8:15, 16). In his last letter to Timothy he declared that he still enjoyed that wonderful assurance although he was facing death for Jesus' sake: "I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day" (II Tim. 1:12).

The Holy Spirit directed the inspired penmen of the New Testament to the choice of words which emphasize the doctrine of Christian assurance.

Witness (both noun and verb forms) is one of the words used to show the teaching of assurance:

"God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost" (Acts 15:8).

"For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified. Whereof the Holy Ghost also is a witness to us. . . ." (Heb. 10:17).

"And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth" (I Jn. 5:6).

"If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater . . . He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself" (I Jn. 5:9, 10).

Perhaps one of the weaknesses of much of teaching on the witness of the Spirit is the failure to recognize that the Holy Spirit is the one Who communicates to us all that we need to know in order that we might walk acceptably with God: "We have received . . . the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God" (I Cor. 2:12).

In Acts 20:23 we have Paul's words that the Holy Ghost witnessed to him concerning the afflictions that awaited him.

The word used for witness in Romans 8:16, Wesley's text for his sermons on "The Witness of the Spirit," is found only in Romans -- 2:15, 8:16, and 9:1.

The simple word know is also used in many places that speak of Christian assurance. John, as might be expected, uses this word of certainty nearly as many times as all the rest of the New Testament writers combined. Besides saying: "We have heard," "we have seen," "we bear witness," "we declare," he also speaks often of what Christians know. "We know that we know him," "hereby know we that we are in him." "I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him" (I Jn. 2:3, 5,13). "We know that we have passed from death unto life," "we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him," "hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us" (I Jn. 3:14, 19, 24).

Paul used strong words to speak of this assurance: "In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him" (Eph. 3:12).

Another strong word that speaks of Christian assurance is plerophoria. This word has the idea of full assurance, of strong confidence. Paul wrote to the Colossians that he was concerned that they might enjoy this "full assurance" (Col. 2:2). In the first epistle to Thessalonica he reminded them that the gospel which he preached brought "much assurance" because it came in the power of the Holy Spirit (I Thess. 1:5). The writer to the Hebrews expressed his desire that they would maintain "the full assurance of hope unto the end" (Heb. 6:11) and also reminded them that it was their privilege to worship God "in full assurance of faith" (Heb. 10:22).

The theme of assurance is clear in the Scriptures and yet there are not a large number of texts that are used by commentators and theologians to prove the doctrine.

Wesley, in the sermon: "The Witness of the Spirit" introduces his supporting texts with the statement: ". . . 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." [18] His supporting texts are I John 2:3, 5, 29; 3:14, 19, 24 and 4:13. These texts certainly support the doctrine of assurance but they do not clearly teach the direct witness of the Spirit. The commentators would not give much support to Wesley that these verses do teach a direct witness.

On I John 3:19 Clarke speaks strongly of the felt reality of true religion but certainly does not see the direct witness in this verse: "(A man) may make empty professions to others, but if he loves either God or man, he knows it because he feels it; and love unfelt is not love, it is word or tongue. This the apostle lays down as a test of a man's Christianity, and it is the strongest and most

infallible test that can be given, He that loves feels that he does love; and he who feels that he loves God and man has true religion.... "19 In these comments about feeling love Clarke says something that may have been too much decried among Christians in these years. In our right carefulness to distinguish between faith and feeling we may have detoured souls from finding reality and heart satisfaction.

Clarke does see the direct witness of the Spirit in I John 3:24: "It was not by conjecture or inference that Christians of old knew they were in the favor of God, it was by the testimony of God's own Spirit in their hearts.... " [19]

Whedon also sees the direct witness of the Spirit in I John 3:24: "And all our state thus attained we may finally know by the Spirit, the direct testimony given by him in our hearts uniting with the testimony of our open practical life." [20]

Alford, on I John 3:24 says: "This indwelling Spirit of God is to the child of God . . . the sure token of his sonship." On 4:13 he says ". . . we need a token, Him we cannot see . . . He had given us such a testimony, in making us partakers of His Holy Spirit." [21]

H. O. Wiley uses I John 5:6 (And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth) as a proof text for the doctrine of assurance, [22] but the commentators do not support him in thus interpreting this text.

Both Ralston [23] and Wiley [24] use I John 5:10 (He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself) as a proof text and several of the commentators also see Christian assurance in this text. Adam Clarke [25], Binney & Steele [26], and Matthew Henry [27a] all see Christian assurance in this verse. It is likely however that Whedon [27b] and the Methodist Commentary [28] are more accurate in their interpretation when they say that this witness is to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah rather than to the believer's sonship.

The strongest, and most used, texts for the doctrine of assurance, specially of the direct witness of the Spirit, are Romans 8:15, 16 and Galatians 4:6. Romans 8:16 is the text for Wesley's two discourses on "The Witness of the Spirit." Richard Watson, Ralston, Pope, A. M. Hills, H. O. Wiley, and Purkiser, in their theologies, all use Romans 8:15, 16 and Galatians 4:6 in their discussion of this truth.

The commentators touch lightly on Galatians 4:6 but they write fully on Romans 8:15, 16. This is the great passage on the direct witness of God's Spirit to our spirit.

"For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God."

"The Spirit itself . . . the auto expresses the independence, and at the same time, as coming from God, the preciousness and importance of the testimony. . . . On this direct testimony of the Holy Ghost rests, ultimately, all the regenerate man's conviction respecting Christ and His work."

[29] "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit. . . . This Spirit is the direct witness; the fruits are the indirect witness." [30]

Bengel, whose *Gnomon of the New Testament* was published in 1742, writes clearly and beautifully: "Cry is a word implying vehemence, accompanied with desire, confidence, a just claim, perseverance. And the Holy Spirit himself cries: Abba, Father. If, while you are alive, you have not attained to this experience, it ought to be the subject of lamentation to you, and you ought eagerly to seek it; but if you have attained it, see that you joyfully continue in it.

"Our spirit testifies: the Spirit of God Himself testifies along with our spirit. Our spirit is human, and therefore its testimony is in itself not infallible. Blessed are they, who distinctly perceive this testimony. " [31]

Clarke writes so well on this that it is worth quoting him at length.

"The persons in question (who cry Abba, Father) had the strongest evidence of the excellence of the state in which they stood; they knew that they were thus adopted; and they knew this by the Spirit of God which was given them on their adoption; and let me say, they could know it by no other means. The Father who had adopted them could be seen by no mortal eye; and the transaction being purely of a spiritual nature, and transacted in heaven, can be known only by God's supernatural testimony of it upon earth. It is a matter of such solemn importance to every Christian soul, that God in His mercy has been pleased not to leave it to conjecture, assumption, or inductive reasoning; but attests it by His own Spirit in the soul of the person whom he adopts through Christ Jesus. And were not the testimony of the state thus given, no man could possibly have any assurance of his salvation which would beget confidence and love. IF God had forgiven me my sins, then I should love him, and I should be grateful, and I should testify this gratitude by obedience. But who does not see that these must necessarily depend on the IF in the first case. All this uncertainty, and the perplexities necessarily resulting from it, God has precluded by sending the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, by which we cry, Abba, Father: and thus our adoption into the heavenly family is testified and ascertained to us in the only way in which it can possibly be done, by the direct influence of the Spirit of God. Remove this from Christianity, and it is a dead letter." [32]

Robert Haldane (born 1764) writes as warmly and as clearly as any Wesleyan on the doctrine of assurance: both on the indirect and the direct witness of the Spirit.

"In this verse the apostle shows that the sons of God may be assured of their adoption, because it is witnessed by the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit, in the heart of a believer, joins His testimony with His spirit, in confirmation of this truth, that He is a son of God. It is not merely the fruits of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers which afford this testimony, but the Spirit Himself. . . . This is a testimony which is designed for the satisfaction of believers themselves, and cannot be submitted to the scrutiny of others." [33a]

He speaks of some points of Christian assurance that have been either ignored or not believed for too long -- and to the hurt of the work of God in the souls of men. The text (Romans

8:15, 16) seems clear enough when we really accept what it says; but practically the direct witness of the Spirit taught in it is seldom emphasized.

Haldane sees clearly the witness of the fruits of a regenerated life and the additional direct witness of the Spirit. He writes: "In all this the Holy Spirit enables us to ascertain our sonship, from being conscious of, and discovering in ourselves, the true marks of a renewed state. But to say that this is all that is signified by the Holy Spirit's testimony, would be falling short of what is affirmed in this text; for in that case the Holy Spirit would only help the conscience to be a witness, but could not be said to be a witness Himself, even another witness besides the conscience, which the text asserts. What we learn, therefore, from it is, that the Holy Spirit testifies to our spirit in a distinct and immediate testimony, and also with our spirit in a concurrent testimony." [33b]

He uses some Scriptures that are seldom used to teach this assurance. "Its reality is indicated in Scripture by such expressions as those of the Father and the Son coming unto us, and making their abode with us, -- Christ manifesting Himself to us, and supping with us, -- His giving us the hidden manna, and the white stone, denoting the communication to us of the knowledge of an acquittal from guilt, and a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it." [33c]

He also writes almost as Wesley on the order of the witness in relation to the work of grace in the heart. "This witnessing of the Spirit to the believer's spirit . . . is never His first work, but is consequent on His other work of renovation. He first gives faith, and then seals. 'After that ye believed ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise.'" [33d]

Matthew Henry and Meyer are two more non-Wesleyans who clearly see the direct witness of the Spirit in Romans 8:16.

"Many a man has the witness of his own spirit to the goodness of his state who has not the concurring testimony of the spirit. Many speak peace to themselves to whom the God of heaven does not speak peace." [34] How needful such a vision and such counsel is at many of our altars today!

"Himself, on His own part, the (received) Spirit testifies with our spirit; He unites His own testimony that we are children of God with the same testimony borne by our spirit. . . . "Paul distinguishes from the subjective self-consciousness: I am the child of God, the therewith accordant testimony of the objective Holy Spirit: thou art the child of God! The latter is the yea to the former; and thus it comes that we cry the Abba en to pneumati (in the spirit)." [35]

The Pulpit Commentary speaks well on this matter of Christian assurance but sometimes seems to see little distinction between the direct and the indirect witness. [36]

Whedon is definite: "There are two witnesses, the divine and the human, testifying to the one fact." [37]

Do other saints and scholars agree with the teaching of Wesley?

The answer to this question is a strong "Yes." The commentators, as we have noted, speak clearly of Christian assurance; and a number of them, both Wesleyan and non-Wesleyan, are definite on the teaching of the direct as well as the indirect witness of the Spirit.

The theologians are also in agreement.

Watson speaks of "all those passages, so numerous in the New Testament, which express the confidence and the joy of Christians: their friendship with God; their confident access to Him as their God; their entire union, and delightful intercourse with Him in spirit." He then goes on to say that "his testimony of the Holy Spirit . . . is two-fold: a direct testimony to or 'inward impression on the soul' . . . and an indirect testimony, arising from the work of the Spirit in the heart and life." [38]

Pope says: "The blessing of personal assurance is the gift of the Holy Ghost, whose office is to bear His witness to the conscience of justification, of adoption with the spirit, and in the soul of sanctification." [39]

"One of His names is the Spirit of adoption. . . . The Spirit Itself beareth witness with our spirit. . . . He mingles His life breath with ours: we cry Father, yet not we but the Spirit in us and with us. The sun preserves the distinction, but it is lost again in the filial cry." [40]

When Ralston takes up The Evidence of Adoption he says, "This, according to the teachings of the New Testament, is to be in the direct witness of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the Christian." [41a] He goes on to answer the objection that this is only the privilege of a favored few: "To this it is a sufficient reply to say, that such a view of the subject is perfectly arbitrary. The Scriptures make no such distinction, but speak of this blessing as being alike attainable by all who seek it. . . . In reference to the Galatians, God is said to have 'sent forth the Spirit of His Son into their hearts,' not because they are a class of Christians favored above others, but 'because they are sons' -- that is, because they are Christians in the proper sense of the term.'" [41b]

A. M. Hills is very clear. "It is not enough that we be forgiven. We need to know it . . . God at great pains and expense to Himself has granted to penitent and believing men His pardoning and regenerating grace. He has also made them His adopted children. Therefore what is more natural than that He should in some way make His favor known to us. . . . The witness of the Spirit is given by an immediate operation within our consciousness in a manner to assure us of the gracious sonship. The state of sonship is prior to this testimony. There is first the fact, and then God's witness to the fact." [42]

The testimony of the saints is in agreement.

Wesley recognized the importance of Christian testimony in this matter. He felt that the argument from Christian experience was a very strong one and he made an exhaustive investigation of this subject. He wrote that he knew of more than "twelve or thirteen hundred persons, whom I believe to be truly pious . . . who have severally testified to me . . . that they do know the day when

the love of God was first shed abroad in their hearts, and when His Spirit first witnessed with their spirits, that they were the children of God." [43]

Is it necessary that a Christian should have the assurance of his acceptance with God? Assurance of one's acceptance with God is a necessity if we are to derive the comforts that salvation promises. The issues are so great. There is a hell to shun and a heaven to gain. The soul must know. Conviction takes away false hope and shows the awful solemnity of being under the displeasure of God. To know that one is forgiven and reconciled with God is an absolute necessity for living with any degree of comfort and peace. This need is met by the divine assurance that we are truly forgiven and adopted into the family of God. This assurance brings to us "the title to the heavenly inheritance; and the Spirit of adoption, or the witness of the Holy Spirit to our adoption, which is the foundation of all the comfort we can derive from those privileges, as it is the only means by which we can know that they are ours." [44]

Burwash, in his notes on the Fifty-two Sermons, makes this comment: "Mr. Wesley considered the doctrine of assurance, and especially that of the direct witness, to be of supreme importance. While not asserting that assurance was necessary to the Divine favor or to final salvation to those who are ignorant of the Gospel privilege, he considers that it is so to all to whom it is preached; and that inward and outward holiness cannot be attained without it." [45]

There is a further argument for the necessity of this witness of the Spirit, Many of us have seen a soul leave the altar with an unsatisfied look on the countenance and an unsatisfied longing in the heart. This longing for divine assurance is the Spirit's protection against deception. The soul has been troubled with the burden of sins and the awareness of God's displeasure as well as the longing cry of his own heart. He wants to know -- to be sure that all is well.

Testimonies from the days of Methodism's power and glory let us know that many of the saints whose lives made a mark for God had this longing for the direct assurance from God that He was satisfied with His own work in their souls. Garrison, in *Forty Witnesses*, gives the testimony of forty eminent Christians who witnessed that they had entered into the experience of entire sanctification. Sixteen of them in their testimonies, indicated that they were not satisfied until they had a direct witness to the state of their acceptance with God.

Dougan Clarke, a Friend, wrote: "I am certain that there were occasions . . . when my soul was filled with the love of God . . . when my peace flowed as a river, and when I enjoyed what I now believe to have been the witness of the Spirit to my adoption and sonship." [46]

David B. Updegraff, of the same church, also testified concerning the witness of the Spirit: "My spiritual conflict was somewhat protracted, but it came to an end in the silent watches of the night, and I had 'peace with God.' His Spirit witnessed with my spirit that I was His child." He goes on to say that the Spirit witnessed both to his regeneration and to his entire sanctification: "The witness of the Spirit to entire sanctification was as clear and unmistakable to my own soul as it was in the experience of justification." [47]

The testimony of Fannie J. Sparkes, a Methodist, illustrates some points on this matter that we may neglect too much in our teaching today. Many have the faulty view that the witness of the

Spirit is only to the experience of entire sanctification. The truth is that the witness of the Spirit is to both experiences of grace, regeneration and entire sanctification, and also sometimes to the fact that the blessing we enjoy is not the experience that we have thought it to be. She says: "I had often earnestly desired the blessing of perfect love . . . some of my friends thought I had now received this blessing, but the Spirit witnessed clearly to my heart that this was the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost' in the 'spirit of adoption.'" [48]

Captain H. Kelso Carter, again a Methodist testimony, wrote that after he had made a consecration that covered everything, after all doubtful things were swept aside and "a large margin left on God's side" he received the witness of the Spirit. "This inward conviction or persuasion I soon recognized as the longed-for 'witness of the Spirit,' and then, for the first time, I knew those thrills of heavenly joy which have been styled the 'effusions of the Holy Ghost.'" [49]

Alfred Cookman, another Methodist, testified: "The great work of sanctification that I had so often prayed and hoped for was wrought in me -- even in me. I could not doubt it. The evidence in my case was as direct and indubitable as the witness of sonship received at the time of my adoption into the family of heaven. O it was glorious, divinely glorious." [50]

Is this witness always equally clear and strong?

This is a question of importance. We must not make the teaching of assurance so weak that we lower the standard of Christian experience but neither must we make it so strong that "we make sorry those whom God has not made sorry." The correct and sober view is that this witness is sometimes clouded, that sometimes it is not as strong as at other times, and that this does not necessarily mean that the soul has broken his relationship with God. This does not mean that when the witness becomes dim that we may be indifferent about it. Far from it! It is a warning to go down before God and seek His face until He again lifts up the light of His countenance upon us.

Wesley's strong statement on this matter probably includes not only the loss of the witness but also the loss of grace from the heart: This witness "is inevitably destroyed, not only by the commission of any outward sin, or the omission of known duty, but by giving way to any inward sin; in a word, by whatever grieves the Holy Spirit of God." [51]

Watson recognizes that the witness may be dimmed "under the influence of bodily infirmities, and in peculiar seasons of temptation...." [52]

Pope's view is that there are divinely given aids to keep this witness bright and clear. "The Word of God and prayer are invariably the vehicle, instrument, and channel for His impartation of assurance; it is in answer to prayer, sometimes solitary and sometimes only ejaculatory; and generally through the application to the soul of the promises of the Holy Scriptures. . . . The Spirit's evidence, based on the Word and Sacrament, is guarded by the ethical and moral testimony of the life. Wherever the assurance of the Spirit is mentioned there is to be found hard by the appeal to the resulting and never absent evidences of devotion, obedience, and charity. . . . God the Holy Ghost does not in His testimony supersede conscience: He honors that ancient representative of the Divine voice within the nature of man; and never disjoins His evidence from that of the

subjective moral consciousness which condemns or approves -- in this case approves -- according to the standard of law written on the heart." [53]

That this witness is not always equally clear is illustrated by the testimonies of some of God's choice saints. Fannie J. Sparks writes that after she received the blessing of perfect love and the witness of the Spirit: "The most of the time since then the witness of perfect love has been clear. My experiences have been varied and new tests have been frequently given. The full assurance of faith and the fullness of the Spirit have not always been mine..." [54]

Rev. William Jones, another Methodist, tells what caused him to lose the clear witness. He heard no one else preaching on entire sanctification and no one testifying to it so he became silent until he lost the brightness of his experience and says: "I found myself without the witness of purity and not always clear in my experience of sonship. " He found in himself periods of fluctuation and became conscious of loss of power in service. He says: "The causes that led to these weaknesses may be all embraced in the term carelessness. . . ." [55]

Sarah A. L. Palmer is another Methodist who enjoyed the witness of the Spirit and yet testified that sometimes it was not as clear as at other times. "Since that blessed day . . . I think there has not been one hour in which my soul has not been sweetly resting in the precious atonement. Though the witness of the Spirit has not been withdrawn for an hour, yet there have been instances when sudden temptation has assumed so much the appearance of sinful emotion as to cause deep pain; but I have been invariably enabled almost instantly to appropriate that blood which cleanseth from all sin." [56]

There is one final important consideration: what can we do to lead people into the enjoyment of the blessings of assurance?

We need to preach it, write about it and bring it into our worship services in songs and testimonies. A man may be a Christian and yet fail to enjoy some blessing of the Gospel because he has not heard about it. The early Methodists preached about Christian assurance; they sang about it; and their people experienced it and testified about it. It may be more than coincidence that of the forty testimonies in Garrison's *Forty Witnesses*, twenty-five of them were from Methodists: they heard entire sanctification preached and they entered into the experience, Of the sixteen who testified concerning the witness of the Spirit, eleven were Methodists. They heard it preached, they sang about it and they obtained that precious blessing of assurance.

There is one more important thing that we can do. We can be careful when dealing with souls, at the altar or elsewhere, that we do not take it upon ourselves to tell them when God has wrought in their hearts either salvation or entire sanctification. It is the prerogative of the Holy Spirit to assure the soul of his acceptance with God. If we interfere with His work we will grieve the Spirit and rob the soul.

We can encourage every soul to cherish the desire expressed in Charles Wesley's hymn:

Short of thy love I would not stop,
A stranger to the gospel hope,

The sense of sin forgiven;
I would not, Lord, my soul deceive,
Without the inward witness live,
That antepast of heaven.

If now the witness were in me,
Would he not testify of thee,
In Jesus reconciled?
And should I not with faith draw nigh,
And boldly, "Abba, Father," cry,
And know myself thy child? [57]

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REFERENCE NOTES

1. Cyclo., p. 63
2. Benner, p. 173
3. *ibid.*, p. 180
4. *ibid.*, P. 189
5. Cyclo.
6. Wes. 52, p. 113
7. *ibid.*, p. 95
8. *ibid.*, p. 96
9. *ibid.*, p. 97
10. *ibid.*, p. 99
11. *ibid.*, p. 100
12. *ibid.*, p. 107
13. *ibid.*, p. 108
14. MethH, No. 438
15. *ibid.*, No. 437
16. *ibid.*, No. 429
17. *ibid.*, No. 444
18. Wes. 52, p. 94
19. AC
20. Wdn.
21. Aif.
22. HOW, Vol. II, p. . 433
23. Ra s., p. 436
24. How, Vol. II, p. 433
25. AC
26. B&S
27. Wdn.
- 27a. MH
28. OneV.
29. Aif.

30. B&S
31. Hg.
32. AC
33. Hald.
34. MH
35. Mey.
36. PC, p. 257
37. Wdn.
38. Wat., p. 511
39. Pope, Vol. III, p. 115
40. *ibid.*, p. 116
41. Rals., p. 436
42. AMH, Vol. II, pp. 215, 216
43. Wes. 52, p. 92
44. Wat., p. 510
45. Wes. 52, p. 92
- 46-50. Forty
51. Wes. 52, p. 92
52. Wat., p. 512
53. Pope, Vol. III, pp. 120, 121
- 54-56. Forty
57. MethH, No. 439

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Ba. -- Barnes' Notes on the New Testament -- One vol., Kregel

BBC -- Beacon Bible Commentary -- Beacon Hill Press

Bg. -- Gnomon of The New Testament -- Bengel, T & T Clark

AC -- Adam Clarke's Commentary -- Carlton & Porter

B&S -- The People's Commentary -- Binney & Steele, Nelson & Phillips 1878

XG -- The Expositor's Greek Testament -- Eerdmans 1967

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MH -- Matthew Henry's Commentary -- Revell

OneV. -- One Volume New Testament Commentary -- Baker 1957

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PC -- The Pulpit Commentary -- Funk & Wagnalls

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MethH -- Methodist Hymnal -- Nelson & Phillips 1878

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