

## **“The Spirit Assures”**

**Ezekiel 36:26; Romans 8:16**

**Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost: October 11, 2009**

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden**

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**Part 2 of the 2009 Fall Preaching Series “Holy Spirit, Fall Afresh on Us.”**

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We are living in days when there is much talk of change. It is natural that insecurity and questioning accompany change. Little wonder, therefore, that in so many areas of our lives we find ourselves needing to be assured or reassured that all is well. If you think about it for a moment, you will realize what an important place we give to the search for assurance in our lives – be it an assurance from an employer that a job is secure; be it an assurance from a broker (if we have stocks and bonds) that an investment is secure; be it an assurance from a physician that our health is sound despite our fears to the contrary.

It seems strange to me that in an age characterized by such a quest for assurance, we – as Christian people – should give such little attention to one of the central doctrines of our faith, namely, the doctrine of assurance. United Methodists are especially encouraged not to neglect this doctrine of assurance that is considered to be a special emphasis of our Wesleyan faith and heritage. There are Christians who have dismissed the need to teach the doctrine of assurance. Some of them argue that Christian assurance is only wishful thinking and it encourages an unhealthy emotionalism. Unfortunately, such people are ignoring the New Testament witness that is the source of and authority for this doctrine.

In his little book *Pathway to Power*, Dr. Leslie Davidson questions whether such people have given sufficient thought to the workings of love. He writes, “When my wife was alive she often used to ask, ‘Do you still love me?’ She knew I did, but she needed the assurance that I did, that love can never be taken for granted. It withers and dies unless there is a constant interchange of assurance, ministered in a thousand ways, by glance and touch, by gift and caress, as well as words. God knows our need of assurance that God loves us, and God presses for the assurance that we love him.”

Let us listen to some questions to test our need for assurance, or measure our lack of it. Have we been content with a faith that has waxed and waned in the face of the change and

insecurity of life? Have we allowed the consumer mentality of our day to reduce our worship attendance, our stewardship, our service, and our awareness of God to a haphazard faith . . . which we buy or sell internally . . . which blows hot or cold . . . in accordance with our feelings of pleasure or disappointment towards God or towards the church, or both? Faced with the slightest crisis in life, have we become nervous and uncertain about our relationship with God, sometimes questioning our very commitment to God . . . or even worse, God's commitment to us? Do we experience the forgiveness and peace of God only on occasions when our condition is so desperate that it drives us to this discovery?

If we answered an honest 'yes' to any or all of these questions, then we are dealing with symptoms of spiritual starvation: we have allowed ourselves to be starved of Christian assurance. Since that may be the experience of some of us today, I chose to include this teaching of the Holy Spirit's assuring work in our Fall Preaching Series, "Holy Spirit, Fall Afresh on Us." I hope this will have at least three positive effects: (1) to help save us from the type of spiritual starvation I have described; (2) to reawaken our spirits to the ongoing, assuring reality of God's Spirit; and (3) to provide each one of us with another opportunity to deepen our commitment to God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To this end I have chosen a verse from the Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 16 as my text: *It is God's Spirit who bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.*

I want to illustrate the impact of the witness of God's spirit upon our lives. For ten years John Wesley had been a minister of the Church of England. Rupert Davies writes that during this time Wesley's, I quote, "immense spiritual and mental energies had been mostly directed upon himself; he had spent immeasurable hours . . . for most of his life, brooding upon the state of his soul and trying to improve it." Wesley had been a man who had given much attention to the need to live a holy life, but a sense of uncertainty had always beset the growth of his Christian faith.

We have Wesley's own record of an occasion when he felt the uncertainty of his faith acutely. On coming to this country to Georgia to commence what was to be an abortive missionary undertaking, Wesley was met by a Moravian pastor called Spangenberg. He asked the pastor for advice about his spiritual life. Spangenberg asked him rather abruptly,

“Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?” Wesley did not know what to answer, and Spangenberg pressed him further: “Do you know Jesus Christ?” Wesley replied, “I know Christ is the Savior of the world.” The pastor came back at him again, “True. But do you know that Christ has saved you?” Wesley answered, “I hope Christ has died to save me.” Spangenberg was not yet satisfied, “Do you know yourself?” Wesley replied, “I do.” But he adds in his Journal, “I fear they were vain words.”

The note of uncertainty and lack of assurance was there, but we thank God for lifting John Wesley out of such a state of spiritual insecurity. Not long afterwards, on May 24, 1738 Wesley emerged from a meeting in Aldersgate Street, London, with a bold assurance of his salvation, which he later described in these words: *I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that Christ had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.*

Note how Wesley used the word “felt.” “I **felt** my heart strangely warmed.” It was happening to him. “I **felt** I did trust in Christ.” The assurance was given and he **felt** it. This personal experience of assurance became the profound base of the Methodist Revival led by Wesley, and from this conviction flowed our great Methodist doctrine of assurance.

To Wesley, what happened in 1738 was direct confirmation of what the apostle calls “the witness of the Spirit.” That witness is so real, just as though God’s spirit impresses it like the stamp of a seal upon our hearts. Furthermore, Wesley insists that we consciously perceive this action of God’s spirit. Wesley goes so far as to say in his first sermon on *The Witness of the Spirit* “those who perceive it not, have it not!” He writes: “The 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 has loved me and given himself for me; and that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.”

Let me now ask: How do we relate to this teaching about Christian assurance? At the start I suggested that we live in an age when it sounds as if sweeping changes are in the air resulting in a quest for assurance. More than our seeking temporal security and material prosperity, what we need to recognize is that – above and beyond all our striving – there

stands our God . . . ever seeking by the witness of the Holy Spirit to give to us a constant assurance of God's love and of the salvation that is ours in Jesus Christ. Down the ages Christians have opened their lives fully to the influence of the Holy Spirit, and have testified to an experience of renewal and assurance of their faith. This can be our experience, too.

Let me sound a note of warning in connection with the teaching of the witness of the Holy Spirit. There is a danger, experienced by some Christians, of wanting to categorize the work of the Holy Spirit – to confine the witness of God's spirit and mode of operation within the limits of their experience and expectations. We must beware of the tendency to probe and to set limits to the manner of the Holy Spirit's operation. As Luther put it: "there are times when too inquisitive minds must learn to crucify the how."

Imagine for a moment that you are walking along the bank of some river, with the sound of its ceaseless rippling in your ears. You would hardly ask how it became a river by mentally trying to separate its mobile particles into those that came from heaven and those that sprang from the earth. The river flows on in unbroken unity through one field after another, undisturbed by the fences that run down to it, or the bridges that cross it. Fact!

So it is with the Holy Spirit who bears witness with our spirit. Like a flowing river, the assurance that God's spirit imparts remains unfathomable but is nevertheless an undisputed fact to the believer. We can no more put the spirit of God under our microscope than we can discern God's spirit beyond the stars with our telescope. Jesus once described the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit in these words: *The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know from where it comes or where it is going to . . . So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.* (John 3:8).

More than the "how," what matters is the reality of the Holy Spirit's witness and the results that follow. The reality of the witness of God's spirit is that we know to whom we belong. This is Christian assurance: that we can say we *are* God's children. ***We need to know and to feel*** that we belong. No one can erect a building of serious proportions on a rickety foundation. Similarly, it would not be possible to live a Christian life on the shifting sands of doubt as to our relationship with God. Therefore, it is not modesty to say merely, "I hope I am a Christian." That might indeed be the proper thing to say if being a Christian

were the result of my own efforts, goodness or achievement. But the New Testament writers insist with one voice that it is nothing of the kind. The apostle writes to the Corinthians, “It is all of God that you are in Christ Jesus.” (1 Cor. 1:30). It is not, therefore, presumptuous to say with quiet confidence, “I *know* and I *feel* that I belong to Christ. I have not done anything to earn it, but God has given me the Holy Spirit and accepted me into his family; and God means me to know that I belong.”

A deep, abiding, and constant assurance of God’s love, forgiveness, and acceptance awaits us as we gladly open ourselves to the influence and witness of the Holy Spirit. God’s promise through the prophet Ezekiel to the people of Israel holds good for us today: *A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you.* (Ezek. 36:26). It can be so for you and for me. God’s spirit can transplant a heart full of uncertainty with a heart full of assurance. God’s spirit can transplant a spirit of doubt and hesitancy with a spirit of confidence and trust. We need this assurance ...so we must pray: Come, Holy Spirit, fall afresh on us and bear witness with our spirits that we may *know* and *feel* with assurance that we *are* God’s children.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.