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THE WITNESS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT: CALVIN, THE PURITANS AND ST. PAUL

by J. K. PARRATT

DR. PARRATT, a newcomer to our pages, has made a special study of the seal of the Spirit in the New Testament. He has recently left the University of Ife, Nigeria, where he lectured in the Department of Religion and Philosophy, for a post in the Research School of Pacific Studies attached to the Australian National University.

By common consent, one of the outstanding contributions of John Calvin to the history of Christian doctrine was his new understanding of the theology of the Holy Spirit, and more particularly his emphasis upon testimony of the Holy Spirit in the experience of the believer. It is the more surprising therefore that this aspect of Calvin's teaching has received scant attention on the part of writers in the Reformed tradition.¹ Probably the best discussion of the subject is still a lengthy monograph by Théo Preiss, which was published over twenty years ago and is still comparatively little known.² The purpose of the present essay is to examine briefly the importance of this aspect of the pneumatology of Calvin and to assess its scriptural basis.

For Calvin the testimony of the Holy Spirit is intimately bound up with the person of Christ and the mediation of salvation to the believer. Thus the testimony of the Spirit is to the gospel, and cannot contradict the doctrine which the gospel propounds.³ The Word of God thus is made alive to the individual by the "secret testimony of the Spirit".⁴ This testimony is superior to that of the church, of the enthusiasts—the two fronts on which Calvin was obliged to conduct his polemic—and even of reason itself. In Calvin's words:

For as God alone can properly bear witness to His own words, so those words cannot obtain full credit in the heart of man until they are sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit who spoke by the mouth of the prophets must penetrate our hearts, in order to convince us

¹ Apart from the monograph by Preiss referred to in the next note there is W. Krusche, *Das Wirken des heiligen Geistes nach Calvin* (1957) and, more generally, R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacraments* (1953) and F. Wendel, *Calvin, the Origins and Developments of his religious Thought* (Eng. trans., 1963).

² *Das innere Zeugnis des heiligen Geistes* (Theologische Studien 21, 1947).

³ *Institutes* I.ix.1.

⁴ *Institutes* I.vii.4.

that they faithfully delivered the message with which they were divinely entrusted.⁵

It is in this context that Calvin can call the Holy Spirit "the earnest and seal to confirm the faith of the godly".⁶ The *testimonium Spiritus sancti internum* adds no new revelation to the word of the gospel, but certifies its truth to the believer.⁷ It is a testimony, not a compulsion, and yet a self-authenticating testimony which needs no justification from reason.⁸

The second aspect of Calvin's doctrine of the *testimonium* concerns the witness of the Spirit to the sonship of the believer. The testimony of the Holy Spirit follows the act of adoption itself⁹ and consists in the "well-founded belief that God regards us with a Father's love". Such a confidence is far removed from a "foolish judgement of the flesh" (the Anabaptists?); rather it is declared in the heart by the Spirit. This teaching is expounded in the *Institutes* as well as the commentaries. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of adoption because "He witnesses to us of the free favour with which God the Father embraced us in His well-beloved Son". Through the Spirit we have boldness to cry "Abba, Father". For this reason God is said to give the earnest of the Spirit in the heart (2 Cor. 1: 22; Eph. 1: 13-14) since "as pilgrims in the world, and persons in a manner dead, He so quickens us from above as to assure us that our salvation is safe in the keeping of a faithful God".¹⁰

It would be an interesting study to trace the historical development of this interpretation of the *testimonium* further. As Karl Barth has pointed out on more than one occasion,¹¹ it had already appeared in Luther's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*. In opposing the *pestilens error* of the Roman Catholic church, that it is impossible to know whether or not one is in a state of grace, Luther pointed out that such a proof is to be found both in the love of the Word of God and also in Christian conversation. At times of temptation and doubt however (Luther's word is *Anfechtung*), when the believer finds it impossible to cling to the "bare word", a further assurance is added: this is the cry of the Holy Spirit in the heart "Abba! Father!" which,

⁵ *Institutes* I.vii.4; see also Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

⁶ *Institutes* I.ix.1.

⁷ Preiss, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15, emphasizes the fact that the Reformers never severed the *testimonium* to the Word from the *testimonium* to personal salvation. The same point is made by L. Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology* (1932), p. 183.

⁸ *Institutes* I.vii.5.

⁹ *Commentary* on Galatians 4: 6.

¹⁰ *Institutes* III.i.3.

¹¹ *Church Dogmatics* I/1 (Eng. trans., 1955), pp. 525f.; also *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life* (Eng. trans., 1938), final chapter.

though it may seem to us both weak and feeble, yet assures the believer of his relationship before God and "certifieth our spirits that we are children of God". The idea occupied a particularly important place in the theology of the Puritans, and examples of it abound in the voluminous writings of that period. G. F. Nuttall has indeed characterized the general Puritan view as follows:

It is in prayer pre-eminently that we see taking effect the Godward aspect of the Spirit's work. That witness is that we are children of God.¹²

Such a judgement is amply justified, not only in the writers to whom Nuttall alludes—Sibbes especially,¹³ but also to some extent John Owen¹⁴—but supremely in that most eloquent Puritan, Thomas Goodwin. For Goodwin the sealing of the Holy Spirit in Eph. 1: 13 was something intensely experimental which makes one sure of salvation; it was "a light that overpowereth man's soul, and assureth him that God is his and he is God's".¹⁵ We find a similar view among certain of the early primitive Baptists, who apparently connected the sealing with the laying on of hands subsequent to believer's baptism.¹⁶ Substantially the same position was taken (from the Anglican viewpoint) by Jeremy Taylor and Richard Baxter.¹⁷

¹² *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Life and Experience* (1946), pp. 62–63.

¹³ *Works* (1863 edition), III, pp. 420–484 (sermons on 2 Cor. 1.21–22), and V, pp. 138–144 (*A Fountain Sealed*, on Eph. 1: 13). For other references see Nuttall, *op. cit.*, pp. 138f., although he surprisingly omits the works of Owen, Thomas Goodwin, Horton, Preston and Baxter referred to below.

¹⁴ *Works* (1852 edition), II, especially pp. 240ff. The Puritans generally made explicit the distinction between the initial act of faith and the sealing of the Spirit. In this they represented a logical development of the Reformers: although Calvin treated the subject under the general head of Faith (*Institutes* III.i–iii), it is clear that faith (like regeneration) had for him a much wider meaning than in later thought. For Calvin it meant the whole of the Christian life, not just its inception. The *Westminster Confession*, xviii.3, explicitly rejects the notion that assurance is of the essence of faith. This distinction between the action of the Spirit in faith and in sealing the Christian is very clearly made by Sibbes and Thomas Goodwin (in the works cited), and also by Richard Baxter (*Practical Works*, 1830 edition, XIV, especially pp. 456–9, *Confirmation and Restoration*).

¹⁵ *Works* (1866 edition), I, pp. 227–253 (sermons on Eph. 1.13–14). Goodwin sees the seal as answering to baptism (although not apparently in point of time).

¹⁶ Benjamin Keach, *The Laying on of Hands upon Baptised Believer's, as such proved to be an ordinance of Christ* (1698), pp. 99ff. (discussed also in J. K. Parratt, "An Early Baptist on the Laying on of Hands", *Baptist Quarterly* XXI, 7, July 1966, pp. 325ff.); William Rider, *Layings on of Hands Asserted* (1656), pp. 115ff.; Thomas Tillam, *The Fourth Principle of the Christian Religion, or the Foundation Doctrine of the Laying on of Hands* (1695), p. 25.

¹⁷ Jeremy Taylor, *Works*, XI, pp. 278–284; he also connects this with strengthening in confirmation. The source for the Baxter reference is given above, note 14. Among other treatments of the subject during this period may be noted Thomas Horton, *Sermons on Romans* chapter 8, especially those on vv. 15–16 (1674), and John Preston's *Treatise on the New Covenant* (1634). Horton (like Wesley later in

It is not our purpose here, however, to trace this doctrine through;¹⁸ we are concerned rather to examine the New Testament basis for it, especially in the Pauline epistles.

St. Paul clearly connects the testimony of the Holy Spirit with the adoption of the Christian. The idea of sonship is, it is true, not a frequent one in the apostle's writings; with the exception of 2 Cor. 6: 18 (a quotation from 2 Sam. 7: 14) the idea occurs only at Rom. 8: 14, 19, and Gal. 3: 26; 4: 6f. These references, however, illustrate with special clarity the intimate connection between the activity of the Holy Spirit and the fact of sonship.

In both Romans 8 and Galatians 4 Paul is dealing with the problem of Christian liberty. In the Galatian Epistle he is stressing liberty from the formal law and the rudiments of the world.¹⁹ His point in Romans is somewhat different, for here Paul is wrestling with the problem of bondage to the flesh, death and sin which works through the moral law (8: 2). In both cases however the keynote is freedom (*eleutheria*), and this freedom finds its expression precisely in the favoured status of our being "sons of God". In Galatians the son is one who has come of age and is no longer subject to tutelage (3: 23-35; 4: 1-7). In Romans this liberty consists in deliverance from the flesh (8: 12-14). It has here also an eschatological point—all things await the "liberty of the glory of the sons of God" (8: 21). The adoption referred to in these passages (Rom. 8: 15; Gal. 4: 5) is evidently a judicial act by which the objective relationship to God is established, and it is thus somewhat akin to justification. But the eschatological implications of the word are never far off.²⁰

It is to be noted that adoption is never viewed outside the person and work of Christ. The sonship of the Christian cannot ultimately be likened to that of Jesus, who was Son in a unique sense (Gal.

his sermons on Romans 8: 16) made no attempt to explain the experience, but used the analogy of light: "it is a thing we cannot expresse, it is a certaine divine impression of light, a certaine inexpressible assurance that we are sonnes of God" (II p. 154).

¹⁸ A. Richardson, who holds that the idea of the *testimonium* is clearly implied in 2 Cor. 3: 14f., claims that it "has been found by Christians in every age of the church to be true to the scriptures of the New Testament" (*An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*, 1958, pp. 113-114). Elsewhere he goes a considerable way towards substantiating this claim (*Christian Apologetics*, 1947, pp. pp. 211-220).

¹⁹ There is no need to regard the elements (*stoicheia*) as astral in nature: H. N. Ridderbos, more plausibly, interprets the word in terms of the principles or axioms comprising "what men thought they possessed in the way of potentials for redemption outside of Christ" (*The Epistle of St. Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, London, 1954, p. 153, note 5, and p. 154).

²⁰ Compare R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, i, p. 278 (Eng. trans., 1952).

4: 4, 6; Rom. 8: 3, "His own Son").²¹ According to Gal. 4: 4-6 adoption is made possible only through the incarnation and redemption wrought by Christ. Similarly in Rom. 8: 3, justification and the gift of the Spirit are possible because the Son of God assumed sinful flesh and offered himself up for sin. In Pauline thought, therefore, adoption is rooted in the appearance and oblation of Christ.

But these passages do not deal only with the judicial side of adoption. In Gal. 4: 6 Paul is not concerned with the initial act of faith in Christ when he speaks of the sending forth of the Spirit of God's Son. The coming of the Spirit here is not to make us sons, but because we are already sons—not to create faith, but on the ground of it.²² There are thus two quite distinct acts in view: our position as sons, and our awareness of that position. The latter stage is subsequent upon the first. There is thus a "transition from the objective sonship to the subjective experience".²³ The sending of God's Spirit into the heart of the child of God, therefore, is of the nature of a subjective authentication—"an assurance of kinship" (Ridderbos)—of the objective fact of our adoption. As Lightfoot put it: "the presence of the Spirit is thus a witness to that sonship".²⁴

Rom. 8: 14-17 is in fundamental agreement. In this passage Paul is again concerned not with the judicial act of adoption but rather with the evidences of it. One such evidence must clearly be the moral walk of the Christian (v. 13), which excludes antinomian conduct. A second characteristic appears in v. 17, namely the joint suffering of the disciple with Christ.²⁵ The final evidence bears closest relationship to that of the Galatian Epistle: this is the reception of the Spirit of adoption, and the witness of the Spirit with our own spirit. The point is again the authentication or awareness of the judicial act of adoption.

We may now turn to the content of this testimony to the fact of adoption. The essence of this, in both Epistles, is the cry "Abba!

²¹ Compare Karl Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 524.

²² See especially the commentary of E. de W. Burton, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (I.C.C., 1921), p. 221: "the direct affirmation of the sentence is that sonship is the cause of the experience of the Spirit".

²³ Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

²⁴ *Galatians* (1896), p. 169.

²⁵ In the period following the Reformation, and especially in the Confessions, three evidences of sonship were often distinguished: i. the word of promise; ii. the normal life, and iii. the witness of the Holy Spirit. For a good treatment of the subject see L. Berkhof, *The Assurance of Faith* (1937), pp. 56ff. The problems surrounding the *sylogismus practicus* (or the conclusion of assurance from good works) and the *sylogismus mysticus* (or the conclusion of assurance from faith and experience) are discussed at length by G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election* (Eng. trans., 1960), pp. 286ff.

Father!" Rom. 8: 15 and Gal. 4: 6 are almost parallel, and both contain the word "cry" (*krazein*), which properly is used of the inarticulate cry of the raven, and thus of a loud and violent shout. Here it signifies the intensity of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Opinions as to the exact significance of the phrase "Abba! Father!" have been curiously divided. Calvin, in his commentary on Romans at this point, was almost certainly incorrect to take the words as implying that "calling upon God is common to all nations and languages", Gentiles as well as Jews. Nor is it likely that Paul is simply translating "Abba" for the benefit of his Greek-speaking readers, for the context is too emotional for this. Others again have suggested that we have here the trace of a primitive liturgy, but this again seems scarcely correct. The inclusion of Aramaic terms in the New Testament is not, of course, uncommon. But here we can hardly escape the conclusion that Paul is consciously alluding to our Lord's own prayer in Gethesemane (Mk. 14: 36). The Christian thus takes up, in his own prayer, the very intimate terminology which our Lord himself had used. Through Christ he is brought into this filial relationship with God, and in prayer he is made aware, by the agency of the Holy Spirit, of his status as a child of God. The Spirit is, then, the Spirit of adoption in the sense that it is through this Spirit that the believer's relationship to God is authenticated.

In Rom. 8: 16 this authentication is elucidated further. It is not immediately apparent, however, whether this verse implies that there are two witnesses—the human as well as the Divine Spirit—or simply one. Théo Preiss has argued forcibly for the translation "the Spirit bears witness *to* our spirit", on the ground that nowhere else does Paul ascribe the certainty of acceptance with God to the human spirit. Most commentators, however, opt for the alternative view, and see here two distinct witnesses to adoption—the human spirit and also the Holy Spirit. But the difference is ultimately slight. The main point is that the testimony of the Spirit of God is an intensely intimate one, witnessing to the very recesses of a man's consciousness to his position as a child of God.²⁶

This latter fact is underlined in Gal. 4: 6, where the sphere of operation of the testimony of the Spirit is said to be "in the heart"; we are concerned here then not just with a *testimonium Spiritus sancti*, but with a *testimonium Spiritus sancti internum*. "Heart" however should not be given too narrow a meaning. Berkouwer

²⁶ So F. J. Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eng. trans., 1961), p. 215: "We could not know this (i.e. that we are sons of God) by looking towards ourselves, what we are and what we do; but the divine Spirit testifies this for us, and our spirit, yielding to the authority of that witness, gains a conviction that transcends all reasoning."

points out that in biblical terminology the word concerns the "full orientation, direction, concentration of man, his depth dimension, from which his full human existence is directed and formed".²⁷ Such a broad perspective serves to guard against a one-sided interpretation of the passages before us. Enthusiasts of all kinds, and advocates of sundry inner light doctrines of every age have invariably tended to obscure the wholeness of the apostle's doctrine of the witness of the Spirit, and to reduce it to a mere inward feeling which has little justification beyond its own psychological satisfaction. It need hardly be stressed that the vagaries of the more enthusiastic of the Anabaptists and Quakers, as well as of their present-day successors, finds little warrant in Paul's teaching here. The *testimonium Spiritus sancti* which bears witness to adoption concerns the whole man, mind and will as well as feeling.

The idea that the witness of the Spirit takes place "in the heart" recurs in several other passages. We find it again in Rom. 5: 5, where the image of His being "poured out" may well refer back to the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. More important, however, is 2 Cor. 1: 21-22, where anointing and sealing, as well as the giving of the earnest of the Spirit, take place in the heart. The use of the imagery of "sealing" is important here.²⁸ While this image is clearly a metaphor based on an outward marking in the flesh, both here and at Eph. 1: 13 and 4: 30 the point is certainly not the external signification. It is, on the contrary, something inward, which, like the earnest, is possessed within the heart. The sealing of 2 Corinthians and Ephesians is not very different from the witnessing of the Spirit in Rom. 8 and Gal. 4: 6. It authenticates possession in the same way as the witness of the Spirit testifies to adoption. Both images furthermore are forward-looking, and are connected with the complete fulfilment of a salvation which the believer partially possesses here and now in the present. The essence of the Pauline sealing of the Spirit may therefore be said to be of the nature of a subjective testimony or ratification of the objective fact of faith in Christ and the status of adoption into which this brings the Christian. It consists then in an authentication or (to use a much-abused term) an assurance, whereby the Spirit of God bears testimony to the whole man that he is a child of God.

²⁷ *Man, the Image of God* (Eng. trans., 1962), pp. 202-203.

²⁸ The vast majority of scholars of all persuasions connect the *seal* of the Spirit in the above texts with baptism. I have suggested elsewhere, however, that this is not necessary, and that the seal may well have been associated rather with the charismatic gifts of the Spirit ("The Seal of the Holy Spirit and Baptism", to be printed in the *Baptist Quarterly*).

If the above exegesis is correct it will be seen that the Reformers' and Puritans' teaching on the *testimonium Spiritus sancti* is firmly rooted in the teaching of St. Paul. The rediscovery of such a doctrine by Calvin and its subsequent elaboration by the Puritans contrasts sadly with its comparative neglect at the present time. If it be true that the effectiveness of the church is largely dependent upon her possession of the Spirit of God, then a fresh examination of this aspect of the Holy Spirit's work is sorely needed at the present time. *Australian National University, Canberra.*