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The Personal Testimony Of The Holy Spirit To The Believer And Christian Apologetics¹

Gary R. Habermas*

To undertake a study of the personal witness of the Holy Spirit to the believer (sometimes called the testimonium), especially when such is defined in the narrow sense as I will do in this article, is to realize that this is a much neglected subject. Comparatively little appears to be available, especially in recent decades. When this topic is then related to the study of Christian apologetics, one narrows the field even further.

A Personal Odyssey

Permit me to begin this discussion on a less than philosophical note by sharing some personal reflections. My hope here is that some readers may find that their own study of the subject is helped rather than hindered by an existential sojourn. But I must also say that this section can safely be ignored by anyone who dislikes such excursions!

Early in my Christian life I went through a long period of intense doubting. It dominated almost ten consecutive years of my research, only to continue a bit more intermittently throughout the following five years.

Viewed from an orthodox standpoint, I waded through some deep waters during these troubled days. I despised religious belief that was not grounded in data and said so on numerous occasions. Sometimes I went out of my way to debate Christians and understandably made some enemies along the way. But I also argued with unbelievers. My guns were simply leveled wherever there were beliefs that were not in accord with clear reasoning methods and the existing evidence. I was on a philosophical journey in search of truth.

More than once my studies took me to a point where I thought I could no longer believe orthodox Christian dogma. There were also occasions when I considered giving up my Christian beliefs in favor of some other philosophy. I dis-

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tinctly remember many times when I contemplated a world where, in a fashion that seemed to me to be consistent with Edgar Allan Poe's writings, there was no ultimate meaning in life; and people went to their graves to be remembered no more. The fall leaves blew over the ground and one's consciousness just ended!

Long before I had ever studied the work of the Holy Spirit, and precisely during these times of doubt, I had often experienced what I could best describe alternately as an unusually potent restraint or a personal conviction concerning the truth of Christianity. Especially during the times of my most intense religious doubt, I had the distinct impression that I could not relinquish my Christian faith. During such moments of severe questioning, when I felt as if my soul had been exposed by the torrents of uncertainty and my faith lay under siege, I would often experience the inward realization that the essence of Christianity was true and that I could never believe otherwise.²

At the time, I simply dismissed these last impressions as some sort of private convictions. I assumed that they were psychological in nature and perhaps everyone (even unbelievers) experienced something similar

concerning their own beliefs. After all, was it not the case that these sensations seemed to be exceptionally subjective?

But if these were merely private “run-of-the-mill” experiences, I could not explain several curious characteristics. For example, why did a strange sort of “residue” remain long after the conviction was only a memory? I could *recall*, but not explain, the certainty of Christian truth I received during those moments. Such assurance was very much unlike anything else I conceived during these days when my intense doubt so militated against any such convictions.

Further, these convictions seemed stronger and more certain than other impressions. They also appeared to be rather distinct from the avenues taken by my routine thoughts. It was almost as if there was an *additional* sense beyond my ever present doubts that was somehow a part of the dialogue. Since I thought of the former as being subjective, I failed to pursue the question of its nature; and no systematic pattern characterized the investigation of this personal odyssey. Yet I continued to return to the subject from time to time in order to reflect upon it.

During these fifteen years, my uncertainty ran the full range of what I would later describe as factual, emotional, and volitional doubts.³ The inner conviction I have just described played absolutely no part in calming my doubts concerning the truth of Christianity. Anyone who reads these words and thinks that my conclusions concerning the witness of the Holy Spirit played such a role in my life is mistaken. One reason for this is that I had not even studied the subject. Neither had I as yet

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gained any insights about the nature of my own experiences. These realizations came much later, many years after the doubts had dissipated.

But the other reason is that the factual questions were finally assuaged only by the data. For those who care about such autobiographical details, it was a ten year study of the resurrection of Jesus that answered my deepest question, namely, was there a factual foundation for Christianity or any other belief system? Literally hundreds of volumes and 1200 note cards on the subject are the remaining witnesses to my early search for the facts concerning Christianity. Much of my research was propelled by my doubts and my view that this event was potentially the key to my own search.

So while I now think that the subject of this article is a crucial component in treating Christian doubt, this realization unquestionably came later in my journey. I reached the first plateau when I almost absent-mindedly understood that these personal convictions *were* distinguishable from ordinary psychological states. The latter not only varied more widely, but were less intense impulses.

By comparison, this inward conviction not only remained throughout the most difficult times but was most notably present when I contemplated abandoning my Christian belief during these latter and most intense moments, I still knew that the essence of Christianity was true and that my only option was to continue to believe! In my quieter moments, the same conviction also characterized my thoughts regarding something even more personal: the reality of my own Christian faith.

To say I was amazed by these last two realizations would be a major understatement! After all, I had spent many years with serious doubts about Christianity as well as my own relationship to God. Once again I came back to the central question: what was this enigmatic conviction?

Years later, I reached the second plateau. By this time I had often noticed, and usually envied, those believers who quietly “just knew” Christianity was correct. Nothing seemed to move them in their convictions. Was there any clue here? This observation, along with a growing interest in the nature of Scripture texts such as Romans 8:16, made me finally decide to study the witness of the Holy Spirit.

Afterwards, I thought I just might have discovered a natural “fit” for my own experience. I very slowly but joyfully concluded that, whatever it was, I apparently shared the conviction that other believers regularly

reported. In fact, maybe my doubts were even a blessing in disguise. The frequency and longevity of my all-consuming questioning probably gave me far more than the average number of occasions on which I could test and observe this experience first hand!

The Nature Of The Holy Spirit's Testimony

Before beginning the main portion of this article, another caution may also be necessary. To the reader who judges, as I did for years, that this topic is condemned to subjectivity, I plead for a fair reading of the material before any such conclusion is drawn. Then if the previous view is still held, it should be *noted very, carefully* that such a conclusion does not affect in any way the truth that is provided by Christian apologetics, for this is a separate topic entirely.

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But if my own conclusions are essentially correct, this becomes an integral part of solving the puzzle of doubt, as well as a means of addressing important cognate subjects in theology and apologetics. I still realize that decisions on this topic are person-related,⁴ in that each believer must study God's Word. And follow this study with careful reflection on his or her own experience. This is precisely the challenge for those who do not accept these conclusions. Since this subject is addressed in Scripture, Christians cannot *ignore this issue*.

Perhaps the most difficult issue is attempting to delineate the *nature* of the Holy Spirit's witness. What does the biblical teaching indicate? What should be included or excluded in such a concept? The problem is complicated by what appears to be a difference in interpretation even among scholars of a similar theological persuasion.⁵ A lack of conclusion on this subject will affect our ability to discern the nature of this important subject and make any applications to the issue of doubt.

It may be helpful to begin our discussion by eliminating certain common ideas concerning the nature of the Holy Spirit's testimony to the believer. Scripture must be our Guide in this subject since the topic is a matter of special revelation. The fact that the witness is never associated with overt signs like an audible voice or some extraordinary experience keeps us from making such an identification. Neither is this phenomenon ever connected with human reason, sense experience, or emotions. It is definitely not attributed to any sort of human derivation at all.

After a study of major passages like Romans 8:15–17 and Galatians 4:6–7, Bernard Ramm identifies the witness of the Holy Spirit specifically as a "direct connection from the mind of God to the mind of the Christian." The subject of this direct testimony is the assurance of the believer's salvation. The process occurs at a level that is deeper than other information we gain by reason or sense experience. In this sense, the Holy Spirit can impress redeemed individuals to a more profound extent than these persons' abilities to touch themselves.⁶

Arguing that the Holy Spirit's witness is actually intuitive in nature, Ramm asserts that such a concept ought not be a stumbling block. All forms of know]edge require "an irreducible intuitive element." So this testimony is a direct confirmation of the believer's salvation, but not a conclusion that follows from an

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argument.⁷ William Lane Craig refers to it similarly as a self-evident assurance for the believer.⁸

If this is the case, should all Christians experience the same thing and in the same way? For Ramm the expressions of this witness are as varied as are the individuals. Different levels of intensity are also found. For example, one believer might express his assurance in a calm, settled manner while another may be more dogmatic. Still other Christians might experience more uncertainty and doubt, even though they certainly believe.⁹

Before moving on, an important clarification needs to be made. We are not attempting to discuss the entire

doctrine and ministry of the Holy Spirit which is obviously an immense subject far beyond this brief article. Rather, we are addressing a very select portion of His ministry: the testimony personally given to believers regarding their own salvation.

In summary, we have said that the essence of the Holy Spirit's testimony is not found in outward phenomena like audible voices, extraordinary experiences, or in spiritual gifts. This is not to say that these occurrences are not found in the New Testament; but in keeping with the specific focus we just mentioned, this is not the nature of this testimony.

Rather, passages like Romans 8:15–17 and Galatians 4:6–7 indicate that this witness is the individual communion between the Holy Spirit and the redeemed individual. This conviction is thus different from what is learned through other normal cognitive channels. Still, there are variations in human expression and intensity. But we need to investigate in more detail what Scripture states concerning the chief purpose for this blessing.

The Major Purpose Of The Holy Spirit's Testimony

Whatever else may be thought about the identification and nature of the testimony of the Holy Spirit, it is true that the major New Testament texts affirm the truth that this inner witness is a personalized testimony to the Christian that he or she is a child of God. We have straightforward assertions that the purpose of this testimony includes the subject of the individual's assurance of his or her own salvation. Perhaps this is not specific enough.

Romans 8:15–17 refers to Christians being adopted as sons, evoking our response of "Abba," the Aramaic term that is translated "Father" or even "Daddy" (v. 15). The new believer is a family member and now addresses the God of the universe in a radically different and intimate manner. Further, the Holy Spirit provides a personal witness to the individual Christian's spirit that he is, indeed, a child

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of God (v. 16). And as if all this were not amazing enough, Paul then tells us that our sonship now entitles us to be coheirs with Christ Himself! This qualifies us to share not only Christ's sufferings, but also His glory (v. 17)!

The most crucial point in terms of our discussion seems to be quite clear from this text. Romans 8:16 characterizes the Holy Spirit's testimony as a personal, firsthand communication with the believer's spirit, informing the Christian of his familial relationship to God.

In another closely related text (Gal. 4:6–7), Paul also explains that the Holy Spirit is sent into believer's hearts, crying out "Abba" to God (v. 6). Paralleling the earlier passage, the apostle informs us that, accordingly, we are sons of God and therefore heirs (v. 7). The subject again concerns becoming a family member through salvation.

Other New Testament texts teach similar messages. Jesus made a promise to His disciples that He would send the Holy Spirit to them (John 14:16). They would know the Spirit because He would indwell them (v. 17); and this indwelling would cause the disciples to realize their unity with Christ (v. 20).

Again the message is clear. Jesus also taught that the presence of the Holy Spirit is the instrument whereby His disciples would obtain the knowledge and recognition of their union with God. Our Lord extends the latter portion of this blessing (and in very similar words) to believers who would follow after the immediate disciples (John 17:20–21).

The apostle John, who heard and recorded Jesus' words on the earlier occasion, also applied this promise to believers as a whole. He informed his readers twice that they would similarly know that God was in their lives due to the presence of the Holy Spirit in them (I John 3:24; 4:13).

We find the same message from Jesus, Paul, and John. This emphasis allows us to state our position even

more clearly. All these sources teach that the Holy Spirit provides the believer with the individual certainty that they are now God's children and thereby participants in His family. This seems to be the major purpose of the Holy Spirit's witness¹⁰ to us.

This testimony specifically concerns several truths related to the believer's salvation such as sonship, co-heirs, and indwelling. In spite of how much some may slice it to be otherwise, it would appear that the witness of the Holy Spirit is not given in order to judge the content of theology as a whole, or to decide between conflicting positions held by Christians. In other words, it" is not a hammer with which we may beat fellow believers over the head, instructing them where they are mistaken! Not only is there a lack of biblical support for this kind of action,¹¹ there are far too many differences both in New Testament churches and today among Spirit-filled believers.

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Among commentators, the most notable exception to our position as summed up at the beginning of the previous paragraph is the view that the witness is primarily the conviction that Scripture is God's Word (or even that there are two witnesses, one to the individual's salvation and one to the Text). This appears to be found most frequently in those who are persuaded of the Reformed theological position.¹²

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But it should be noted that this doctrinal stance does not require this interpretation (as Ramm's volume shows).¹³

A popular passage often used to support the view that the Holy Spirit primarily testifies to the truthfulness of Scripture is I Corinthians 2:4–16. Yet this text seems on the one hand to refer to much wider aspects of the ministry of the Holy Spirit; while on the other, it does not appear to specify any mention of the witness at all. Ramm agrees with this assessment, remarking that the overall intent of these verses is Christological and soteriological, not oriented toward the more specific subject of the Holy Spirit's testimony.¹⁴

Yet this is not to deny that there is a secondary sense in which the witness still confirms Scripture. If the witness primarily confirms the believer's salvation and place in the family of God it will still lead to the ancillary recognition of a few other inclusive aspects of theology, as well. For example, if the chief confirmation is that the believer is a child of God, we also know that the nature of the Gospel data is true. After all, saving faith in New Testament terms is not exercised in a vacuum. Further, it would seem to follow that Scripture, which sets forth both

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the Gospel and the testimony of the Holy Spirit, is God's Word. We also emphasize our earlier conclusion concerning the primary focus being the witness to believers.

Here we need to address another related aspect of our subject. Is the Spirit's witness to the believer direct or indirect? In other words, is it mediated through Scripture or immediate to the heart of the Christian?

We have just said that this testimony is not independent of Scripture—it comes through the Word of God by which we know the nature of this witness in the first place. Yet texts like Romans 8:16–17 seem to say that the Holy Spirit testifies to the believer's spirit. It can hardly be denied that this confirmation is intensely personal. Perhaps it is best to say that the witness comes through Scripture, and then directly to the believer.¹⁵

At any rate, I think that few evangelical scholars would object that at least a crucial aspect of the Holy Spirit's personal testimony to believers includes the provision of the certainty and assurance of one's salvation and adoption into the family of God.¹⁶ Many hold that such constitutes the primary purpose of this testimony.

Ramm is particularly adamant at this last point, insisting that too many commentators insist on wandering to areas beyond the direct provision of this testimony. Ramm remarks: "It is a witness to individual participation in salvation; of the divine adoption. The intent of the witness is to bear witness to our participation in this

redemption.” ¹⁷ I agree that the primary product of the Holy Spirit’s testimony is the believer’s certainty of his salvation. This blessing is the possession of all believers and is independent of items like one’s profession, schooling, or knowledge. Ramm concludes: “The humblest person enjoys the same certainty as the learned theologians.”¹⁸

In conclusion, even if the witness of the Holy Spirit includes additional areas of confirmation, its chief purpose is to provide believers with the personal certainty and assurance of their own participation in God’s eternal plan. Several New Testament writers and texts agree on this central message. There are tremendous implications here for subjects in theology and apologetics, such as the question of doubt. Inasmuch as this assurance is given directly from God to us, through His Word, the knowledge that one is indeed a child of His should produce comfort and peace, especially for those who struggle with these issues.

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The Testimony Of The Holy Spirit And Evidence

How does all of this relate to the study of apologetics?¹⁹ Can the presence of the Holy Spirit’s testimony serve as any sort of argument for the truth of Christian theism? If not, then how can we break out of the subjective mode that was mentioned at the beginning of this article? And in what sense can it really assist the individual who is tormented by doubts concerning his own salvation, for example?

We need to recognise that the Holy Spirit’s witness cannot be proven. Neither can it prove the Bible or Christian Theism to be true. To assert the opposite is to turn the process around backwards. Apologetic evidences show that Christianity is true. The Holy Spirit then provides personal testimony that the individual believer is a Christian.

Holding that the Holy Spirit’s witness cannot be demonstrated fails to render it valueless, even in apologetics. Initially, this witness is not proven by reason or sense experience,²⁰ but neither can it be disproved by such methods.

This is not to concede that the witness of the Holy Spirit itself is only subjective in nature. Ramm interestingly argues that it is both objective and subjective. The latter aspect is characterized by the private, inward features of this testimony. In addition to being incapable of proof, the Spirit’s broader work with the believer cannot be experientially shared or communicated to an unbeliever (I Cor. 2:14). Thus, while this witness may be defined, it cannot be proven, and neither can it be explained so that an unbeliever can also experience it while remaining unchanged.

Ramm asserts that there is also an objective component involved in the testimony of the Holy Spirit. It is shared by all believers, hence it can be reported as a common phenomenon among them, even though not all believers necessarily experience it in the same manner. Also, the content on which this testimony is based, namely the facts of the Gospel message, are highly evidenced.²¹ Still, we should not mistakenly assume that these considerations make the witness an objective concept.

R.C. Sproul agrees that there is harmony between the witness of the Holy Spirit and various evidences for Christian Theism. “There is an inseparable rela-

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tionship between *testimonium* and *objective evidence*... The Spirit causes us to submit or yield to the evidence. Our yielding is a subjective act to an objective basis of evidence.²²

We might look from another angle at the relation between the witness of the Holy Spirit and apologetics. If the truth of Scripture can be confirmed by classical or other evidences, it may be argued that Jesus’, Paul’s, and John’s teachings on the subject of the witness of the Holy Spirit are thereby given an even more substantial basis. While this witness is not objectively proven, it is a reported experience of many believers; and it is firmly secured to a solid foundation.

What other strengths might be presented by a phenomenon that we have considered to be chiefly subjective and individually-experienced? Must an individual's personal claims be questioned or considered untrue on the grounds that they are private? It must not be forgotten that the witness of the Holy Spirit rests on strongly-attested evidential grounds.

Roderick Chisholm has argued that one's personal, experiential claims²³ as long as they are unopposed by conflicting evidence, ought to be considered to be trustworthy.²⁴ Similarly, Richard Swinburne refers to the "principle of credulity," according to which one's own experience constitutes evidence for a belief unless there is contrary data which disprove it.²⁵

While the witness of the Holy Spirit cannot be dismissed as some credulous belief, we have also said that it cannot be objectively proven. So it is not being suggested that it be included as an apologetic for Scripture or for Christian Theism as a whole. The skeptic is not being asked to view it in an evidential context.

We have developed the position that it is a personal indication from God to the believer that he or she has, indeed, experienced salvation and adoption. Although not objectively verifiable, the witness of the Holy Spirit still functions in its proper realm, serving the individual by providing the certainty of *their own belief*. It is therefore valuable in solving certain sorts of doubts, as well as contributing an assurance concerning the truthfulness of the Gospel message. Why ought the Christian not view his or her own experience in this way, especially when it is shared by other believers and as well being based on a firm foundation?

Believers have solid reasons on which to base their faith. Why should they be *surprised* if their own personal experience matches what the Scripture attests? In other words, Jesus and His apostles Paul and John testified that the Holy Spirit

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would produce His personal testimony in their lives. Should not the realization of such an internal witness be considered normal (if not actually exciting!) in light of the clear, evidenced texts that teach this truth?

Possible Objections

This topic often generates either questions or objections, both from Christians and from unbelievers. We will attempt here to single out a few of the more prominent issues,

Some Christians might wonder why they have not felt such a witness at all? Why have they not noticed this before? If the chief focus in such a question is a search for a *feeling*, it should not be surprising if such is apparently unnoticed. While the Holy Spirit's testimony can certainly affect one's feelings and frequently does so it is not an emotion at all. One ought never to identify it as an emotion and look for it there.

We should also remember the common observation that emotions often seem to disappear when placed under a microscope! We should not pace ourselves by either the presence or the absence of our feelings; few reminders need to be repeated more frequently!

There can be many hindrances to the realization that the witness is present in our lives. The New Testament explains the work of the Holy Spirit can be stifled or restrained (Eph. 4:30; 1 Thess. 5:19). While sin can suppress the recognition of God's presence, so can the simple denial of the New Testament's teaching on the subject of the witness. Perhaps not surprisingly, if one *rejects* the biblical reports of the Holy Spirit's testimony, how can it then be surprising that one does not appear to experience it?

In this last sense, religious doubt can develop into a vicious circle. Unanswered questions or the lack of assurance may lead a Christian to look suspiciously at this subject of the Holy Spirit's testimony, perhaps because it is not objectively known or believed. This very suspicion can keep one from recognizing the presence of this witness which may be the item needed to quell these questions!

As I have said above, this is exactly what happened in my own situation. For years I questioned the nature of this testimony, chiefly because I could not prove it. In so doing, I failed to identify the Holy Spirit's witness;

it was there all the time! This subtle denial of its rightful, biblical place in my life effectively cut off the assurance the Holy Spirit could have provided.

While my particular case cannot be generalized into a prescription for others, there are several possible reasons why a believer may not be able to identify the Holy Spirit's witness in their own life. Sin, the subtle or blatant denial of the testimony, or simply a misidentification of its nature are probably the chief obstacles.

These barriers need to be removed. Ramm states it this way: "The remedy consists in the restoration of spiritual vision and sight, of the opening of ears and eyes resulting in an intuition of the truth of God."²⁶

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Personal questions should not keep the Christian from recognizing a crucial truth: Scripture does, in fact, teach something on this subject. One's inability to recognize the nature of the Holy Spirit's testimony is no reason to deny its reality. This is especially so because the discipline of apologetics verifies the Source that teaches it.

A serious challenge of another sort might come from theological "liberals," practitioners of non-Christian religions, or cultists of various species. What if they claim a similar witness or conviction concerning their own version of salvation? What prevents them from saying that they are also totally convinced that they believe the right things? Several responses need to be made here.

It should be briefly mentioned that it is not the believers job to classify the members of each group and judge who ultimately belongs under each label. Beyond this initial caution, Ramm argues a further and potentially crucial point. He asserts that these other groups basically do not hold any specific doctrine of the witness. He responds to this question in a detailed discussion.²⁷

Let us grant that non-Christians may claim to have some sort of assurance concerning their beliefs. Our question for them would be whether they specifically claim to have the direct, inward testimony of God. They may, of course, respond in different ways.

If the assurance they seek of is a general conviction, it should be pointed out that there are some similarities between assurance and this testimony. However, the two are not synonymous. One crucial difference is that the assurance is not supplied by a direct act of God through His Word. This is the reason for the special, one-to-one conviction that the person is a child of God. Further, a general assurance of one's beliefs (on any subject) can be accounted for in other ways, such as by one's personality type.

The individual may insist they do indeed have this direct testimony. If they turn out, against earlier indications, to be Christians (even if differing somewhat on certain secondary beliefs), the issue is solved.

When they insist that they are non-Christian and still experience God's direct testimony, we have entered the field of apologetics. We will then need to discuss the truthfulness of the belief systems that are involved. In other words, since claims of assurance are not directly open to demonstration, we need to investigate the claims themselves in the context of the philosophies from which they emerge.

If we are correct, apologetics establishes Christian theism, while the witness of the Holy Spirit persuades the individual believer concerning a personal participation in salvation. More than just a claim to assurance is required at this point. Biblical teachings concerning the Holy Spirit's testimony proceed from a firm basis. If Ramm's assessment is accurate, there may be few challenges to this Christian teaching.

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Some might think we are claiming that the testimony of the Holy Spirit proves Scripture to be true, only to have the Bible demonstrate the truthfulness of the Spirit's witness. There is no circular argument here however, for we have said without hesitation that the witness does not prove Scripture. In reality, this testimony gives no external verification at all. While the Holy Spirit may use it in a secondary sense to convict a believer that the Bible is the Word of God, this is just what it is, a conviction. It is not an argument for the truth of Scripture. Thus there is no circularity here since the witness is not an apologetic argument at

all.

The reader could then retort: "Then if it all depends on the truth of apologetic arguments, the witness of the Holy Spirit itself really is totally subjective, after all. Thus it has no value.

We have already responded in much detail to this sort of challenge. The truthfulness of Christianity is shown by apologetics, not the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit. While this does not mean that the latter is totally subjective, it is highly personal. Then does it have any value? Even if all the witness did was to *build further* upon the truth of Scripture and provide private assurance to the believer that they were children of God, this is still exceptionally crucial, especially to the doubting believer.

Believers might object that this doctrine is too emotional, thereby prompting various sorts of sensationalism. We have tried to be clear that the witness of the Holy Spirit is not an emotion or feeling. While this conviction may affect one's emotions, this is no indictment against it, for so do many other Christian teachings that are not thereby labeled as perilous. God certainly knew this when He decided to create us with emotions!

Perhaps following a similar line of thought, others will still say that the witness of the Holy Spirit is dangerous because it may lead some believers to claim that strange aberrations in their thinking were given to them by the Holy Spirit. We find no encouragement in the New Testament message for those who would claim to have special, independent teachings or interpretations. To the contrary, its only, *clearly, stated function is* to testify to Christians concerning their own inclusion in the body of Christ.

Some Christians fear that the Holy Spirit's testimony is given in a manner that is independent of Scripture. This is *not* the case; we would not even know about the witness except by the teachings of Scripture. The Holy Spirit works *through* the text of the Bible, not in ways that are contrary to it. Lastly, in providing the private conviction that the believer is a child of God, we have a secondary witness to both the nature of the Gospel message (by which we are saved), as well as the truth of the Texts that record it.

This is the sense in which we have said that while occurring *through* Scripture, the witness then comes *directly*, to the believer in a one-to-one manner. If this interpretation is correct, in order to be true to the New Testament teaching, the message must be an individualized one.

Ultimately, it is a moot point whether someone thinks this teaching might be

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misused in some sense. For the believer, the primary issue concerns the *nature* of the Holy Spirit's testimony, as taught in Scripture, including by our Lord Himself. For those who still feel uneasy for one of these reasons, a strange inversion of these objections may now be witnessed. While some may think that Scripture is still being sidestepped, the *objection itself* appears to overlook the biblical teaching on this subject, thereby drawing a non-biblical conclusion!

Finally, both believers and unbelievers may ask if the witness of the Holy Spirit can be explained in psychological terms. What if it is only a personal endorsement of one's private beliefs, culture, and environment?

The Spirit's testimony is more than just the internal state of being reassured that one's beliefs are true. Beyond just a resolution *about* one's theological beliefs, the witness seems in a sense to be almost part of oneself, as if it were woven into the fabric of one's innermost being. The witness prevails when normal assurance is assaulted to the point of despair. It is the deepest conviction that one can possibly have regarding one's salvation, since it proceeds from God Himself directly to the believer.

If I may again borrow from my own experience, it was *particularly* when doubt assailed me the most that I often noticed the testimony of the Holy Spirit. It remained the firmest in those seasons when I most feared I was going to lose my faith. Neither was it just a spark in those moments: it burst forth in a conviction that surprised me. At the time, I did not understand it.

Probably the clearest example occurred when my mother asked me once if I would give up Jesus Christ at

that very moment. My immediate reaction was an exceptionally strong revulsion at the thought of turning to another religion. This was followed by an incredibly forceful awareness of my love for Jesus Christ, which was shocking because I was so unsure of it. I later concluded that this really was the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

An illustration might be helpful. An adequately strong anchor firmly embedded in rock can hold a ship in place. As the boat drifts, the slack in the chain is used up; but the ship reaches a point where it can drift no further than is allowed by the anchor. The ship cannot break free. On many occasions, I witnessed my “chain” being stretched to the furthest point, only to discover that I could not deny Christ or give Him up for another Savior. I also realized that it was not my faith or my stamina that provided the insurance.

In addition to such indications that the testimony of the Holy Spirit is essentially different from, and deeper than, psychological certitude, psychology cannot explain the objective evidences upon which this truth is based. The central nature of this witness is soteriological, and its basis in the Gospel facts is demonstrable. To restate it, the primary function of the witness is to convict a believer of his or her personal salvation. The cornerstone of salvation, the Gospel data, can be historically verified. These facts remain untouched by psychological inquiry. Since this basis is firm, I should not be surprised if I do, indeed, experience the witness of the Holy Spirit, just like Jesus and more than one New Testament author promised.

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The matter can be summed up briefly. A Christian is justified in making the assertion that the Holy Spirit provides a witness that they are, God’s children. While this claim does not constitute any sort of external proof, neither is it disproved by methods such as reason or sense experience. Further, the assertion is based on a highly evidenced foundation. The discovery that this witness is present in the believer’s life should be considered normal in light of the objectively evidenced Scripture passages that declare this truth.

Conclusion

Comparatively little has been written on the subject of the personal testimony of the Holy Spirit, to the believer especially in regard to apologetics. Too many Christian scholars have essentially ignored its place in the believer’s life, perhaps because of difficulties like those we have discussed in this article. For starters, defining the truth of this doctrine and identifying its domain are even difficult.²⁸

As an important part of the teachings Scripture this subject needs to be carefully addressed. Its contribution especially on the issue of Christian doubt is indispensable. The Holy Spirit stands alongside the believer, going beyond the discipline of apologetics by providing His direct testimony to the Christian that he is truly saved.

¹ A less detailed and much briefer form of this discussion is found in Gary R. Habermas, *Dealing with Doubt* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990), Chapter 8.

² I am simply describing the perception of my own experience here and elsewhere in the chapter, not referring to the doctrine of eternal security.

³ See Habermas, especially Chapters 2–5.

⁴ For the Importance of person-relatedness in argumentation, see George Mavrodes, editor, *The Rationakty of Belief in God* (Englewood Cliffs Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), 50.

⁵ For a discussion of various positions among Reformed scholars, for example, see William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology, of the Reformation* (London: The Banner Truth Trust. 1852. 1967). 118–119 cf. Louis Berkhof, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House. 1979), 184–185.

⁶ From many of the insights in this article I am indebted to the excellent and challenging volume by Bernard

Ramm. *The Witness of the Spirit*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959). For his conclusion here, see 54: cf. 36, 52, 84, 86, 116.

⁷ Ibid, 84.

⁸ See William Lane Craig, *Apologetics: An Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 18–19.

⁹ See Ramm, 74, 76, 82.

¹⁰ A word of caution may be necessary for the sensitive reader. Throughout this article, the use of the impersonal pronoun for the witness or testimony of the Holy Spirit is a reference to the activity or result itself, not to a Member of the Trinity.

¹¹ Some may insist that I Jn. 2:20, 26–27 is an exception, where the testimony of the Holy Spirit imparts a broader menu of doctrines for Christian certainty (beyond the witness to one's salvation), to the extent that believers do not even need teachers of doctrine. For instance, Craig thinks that this text concerns a believer's conviction regarding the "basic truths" of Christianity (without defining which ones he means). Yet Craig still agrees that the witness of the Holy Spirit does not disclose doctrine (pp. 18-19; cf. Ramm, 93–94). (In light of his second comment, it is questionable to what extent Craig holds what we might term "the extended theology" view of this Johannine text.) While the initial insistence on a broader range of theology, might seem very convenient as a means of resolving theological differences of opinion, it is problematic as an interpretation of the above passage on several fronts.

(1) This interpretation is a difficult one to maintain when it is remembered that, in everyday ministry, such an anointing does not provide apparent help in solving theological issues between believers. While our experience ought not be used to interpret Scripture, it would seem that at least some present help would come from this view if it were the correct one!

(2) This view would favor an interpretation that is not at all clear from the text. For example, although Raymond Brown believes that this passage refers to the Holy Spirit, he develops a case for those expositors who think that the reference is to the anointing of the Word of God, rather than that of the Spirit (Raymond E. Brown, "The Epistles of John" *The Anchor Bible* [Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1982], vol. 30, 345–347.) Most scholars will agree that it is unwise to take any position that is based largely on a text that is itself rather difficult to interpret.

(3) Further, John would hardly be saying in this passage that the Holy Spirit nullifies the need for theology teachers, since this would be self-contradictory. John was obviously a teacher himself, plus he would stand refuted by the very fact that the teaching in his epistle was needed to communicate the truth in question!

(4) This interpretation would also vilify the rest of Scripture, which few would be willing to say is John's message!

(5) Perhaps most importantly for our present purposes, the immediate context appears to indicate that the theology on which Christians do not need further teaching (vs. 26–27) is precisely that of salvation, which would agree with the interpretation that we have so far favored concerning the testimony of the Holy Spirit. After all, John is warning his audience about those who deny the deity of Christ and leave the family of believers (vs. 18–23), followed by his encouragement to his readers to pursue eternal life (vs. 24–25). This discussion of salvation immediately precedes the text in question.

(6) Lastly, whatever one concludes about these difficult verses, John clearly states that assurance of one's salvation is included as knowledge that is imparted by the Holy Spirit to the believer (I John 3 :24; 4: 13; cf. 5: 13). So at least this portion of our thesis would remain intact.

¹² Cunningham contends that the most prominent view among the Reformers was that the Holy Spirit's witness was to Scripture being God's Word. He also points out that there were theological reasons for this interpretation-this position strictly avoided any claims to either independent, special revelation or to the testimony of the church (p. 118), both obviously being rejoinders aimed at the Catholic views. Ramm agrees with the reasoning behind this position, noting that the Reformers' interpretation sought to avoid both

personal experience and any reliance on the church (p. 102; cf. pp. 98-105). Brown's discussion mentioned in the previous endnote shows that this is not an exclusively Reformed position.

¹³ For example, in an essay largely devoted to John Calvin's view, R.C. Sproul identifies the testimony of the Holy Spirit primarily as a witness to the inspired nature of Scripture. Perhaps surprisingly, he does not directly discuss the personal testimony to the believer's salvation. (See Sproul's essay "The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit" in Norman Geisler, editor, *Inerrancy* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979], 336, 338, 354.)

But it appears that such a position is required even in Calvin's own teaching on the subject. One indication is that Calvin does note repeatedly that the witness at least includes the believer's salvation and sonship. He states clearly: He does not simply say that the Spirit of God is a witness to our spirit ... Paul means that the Spirit of God affords us such a testimony that our spirit is assured of the adoption of God ... for while the Spirit testifies to us that we are the children of God, He at the same time pours this confidence into our hearts, so that we dare invoke God as our Father." (See John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians, Calvin's Commentaries*, translated by Ross MacKenzie, edited by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979], 170.)

Concerning another one of the passages we have surveyed, I John 3 :24, Calvin notes well that there is a difference of emphasis between Paul and John. Nevertheless, John's "statement verbally agrees with Paul's, when he says that the Spirit testifies to our hearts that we are God's children and through Him cry to God, Abba, Father... (John Calvin, *The Gospel According to John 11–21 and The First Epistle of John. Calvin's Commentaries*, translated by T. H. L. Parker, edited by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979], 282.)

¹⁴ Ramm includes an enlightening discussion of this topic on pp. 99-105 (cf. 60–61, 68, 94).

¹⁵ From Calvin's quotations provided in note 13 above, we can see how freely this reformer mentions the theme of the Holy Spirit witnessing to the spirit and heart of the believer. Calvin also refers to the mind in this context, but Sproul notes that the primary connection, for Calvin, is with the believer's heart (Sproul, 349).

¹⁶ Sproul thinks that "certainty" is the "distinctive term" on this subject (pp. 336, 344-347). In fact, he states that "The uniqueness of the testimonium is found in its focus on the question of certainty" (p. 338, his emphasis).

¹⁷ Ramm, 51 (his emphasis).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 113; cf. 82.

¹⁹ For an overview of a number of major positions on the relation between the Holy Spirit and apologetics (Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and Benjamin Warfield), see the lengthy article: "Holy Spirit, Role in Apologetics," in Norman L. Geisler's *Baker's Dictionary of Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, forthcoming, 1998).

²⁰ Sproul states that, for Calvin, the witness "goes beyond and transcends reason" (p. 341). Sproul adds his own comment that "The Spirit searches things that go beyond what the senses perceive" (p. 354). See Geisler's article (previous note) for several others who agree that, while the work of the Spirit goes beyond evidences, it still works with and through the data.

²¹ Ramm, 52, 75–76, 82, 117.

²² Sproul, 342–343 (his emphasis).

²³ While the testimony of the Holy Spirit is not a feeling, reason, or sense experience, it does impinge on all three, for it affects the entire person.

[24](#) Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, second edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1977), 26–33. Ramm is in agreement here (p. 76).

[25](#) See Richard Swinburne, “The Evidential Value of Religious Experience,” in *The Sciences and Theology in the Twentieth Century*, edited by A. R. Peacocke (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 182–196.

[26](#) Ramm, 84.

[27](#) *Ibid.* 49, 106–107, Chapter V.

[28](#) For precisely this reason, everything in this article ought to be judged by the rule of Scripture.

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