

THE
WORKS
OF
THE REV. JOHN NEWTON

LATE RECTOR OF THE UNITED PARISHES OF
ST. MARY WOOLNOTH AND ST. MARY WOOLCHURCH-HAW,
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CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA,
DISCOURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,
A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,
MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

BY THE REV. R. CECIL, A. M.

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LETTER VIII.

ON THE INWARD WITNESS TO THE GROUND AND REALITY OF FAITH.

SIR,

I READILY offer you my thoughts on 1 John v. 10, "He that believeth on the Son of God, hath the witness in himself;" though, perhaps, you will think I am writing a sermon rather than a letter. If we believe in the Son of God, whatever trials we may meet with in the present life, our best concerns are safe, and our happiness is sure. If we do not, whatever else we have, or seem to have, we are in a state of condemnation; and living and dying so, must perish. Thousands, it is to be feared, persuade themselves that they are believers, though they cannot stand the test of scripture. And there are many real believers, who, through the prevalence of remaining unbelief and the temptations of Satan, form hard conclusions against themselves though the scripture speaks peace to them. But how does this correspond with the passage before us which asserts universally. "He that believeth, hath the witness in himself?" for can a man have the witness in himself and yet not know it? It may be answered, The evidence, in its own nature, is sufficient and infallible; but we are very apt, when we would form a judgment of ourselves, to superadd rules and marks of trial which are not given us, for that purpose, in the Bible. That the word and Spirit of God do witness for his children, is a point in which many are agreed, who are far from being agreed, as to the nature and manner of that witness. It is, therefore, very desirable rightly to understand the evidence by which we are to judge whether we are believers or not.

The importance and truth of the gospel-salvation is witnessed to in heaven, by "the Father, the Word, and the Spirit." It is witnessed to on earth, by "the Spirit, the water, and the blood," verses 7 and 8. The Spirit, in verse 8, I apprehend, denotes a divine light in the understanding, communicated by the Spirit of God, enabling the soul to perceive and approve the truth. The water seems to intend the powerful influence of this knowledge and light, in the work of sanctification. And the blood, the application of the blood of Jesus to the conscience, relieving it from guilt and fear, and imparting a "peace which passes all understanding." And he that believeth hath this united testimony of the Spirit, the water, and the blood, not by hearsay only, but in himself. According to the measure of his faith (for faith has various degrees) he has a living proof that the witness is true, by the effects wrought in his own heart.

These things, which God has joined together, are too often attempted to be separated. Attempts of this kind have been a principal source and cause of most of the dangerous errors and mistakes which are to be found among professors of religion. Some say much concerning the Spirit, and lay claim to an inward light, whereby they think they know the things of God. Others lay great stress upon the water; maintaining a regular conversation, abstaining from the defilements of the world, and aiming at a mastery over their natural desires and tempers; but neither the one nor the other appear to be duly sensible of the value of the blood of atonement, as the sole ground of their acceptance, and the spring of their life and strength. Others, again, are all for the blood; can speak much of Jesus, and his blood and righteousness; though it does not appear that they are truly spiritually enlightened to perceive the beauty and harmony of gospel-truths, or that they pay a due regard to that holiness without which no man can see the Lord. But Jesus came, not by water only, or by blood only, but by water and blood; and the Spirit bears witness to both, because the Spirit is truth. The water alone affords but a cold starched form of godliness, destitute of that enlivening power which is derived from a knowledge of the preciousness of Jesus, as the Lamb that was slain. And if any talk of the blood without the water, they do but turn the grace of God into licentiousness; so, likewise, to pretend to the Spirit, and at the same time to have low thoughts of Jesus, is a delusion and vanity; for the true Spirit testifies and takes of his glory, and presents it to the soul. But the real believer receives the united testimony, and has the witness in himself that he does so.

To have the witness in ourselves, is to have the truths that are declared in the scripture revealed in our hearts. This brings an experimental conviction, which may be safely depended on, that "we have received the grace of God in truth." A man born blind may believe that the sun is bright upon the testimony of another; but if he should obtain his sight, he would have the witness in himself. Believing springs from a sense and perception of the truths of the gospel; and whoever hath this spiritual perception is a believer. He has the witness in himself. He has received the Spirit; his understanding is enlightened, whereby he sees things to be as they are described, in the word of God, respecting his own state by sin, and the utter impossibility of his obtaining relief by any other means than those proposed in the gospel. These things are hidden from us by nature. He has likewise received the blood. The knowledge of sin, and its demerits, if alone, would drive us to despair; but by the same light of the Spirit, Jesus is apprehended as a suitable and all-sufficient Saviour. All that is declared concerning his person, offices, love, sufferings, and obedience, is understood and approved. Here the

wounded and weary soul, finds healing and rest. Then the apostle's language is adopted, "Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord." He has likewise received the water, considered as the emblem of sanctification. To a believer, all that the scripture teaches concerning the nature, beauty, and necessity of holiness, as a living principle in the heart, carries conviction and evidence. A deliverance from the power, as well as from the guilt of sin, appears to be an important, and essential part of salvation. He sees his original and his proper happiness, that nothing less than communion with God and conformity to him, is worth his pursuit. And therefore he can say, "My soul thirsteth for thee; I delight in the law of God after the inward man." In a word, his judgment and his choice are formed upon a new spiritual taste, derived from the written word, and correspondent with it, as the musical ear is adapted to relish harmony: so that what God has forbidden, appears hateful; what he has commanded, necessary; what he has promised, desirable; and what he has revealed, glorious. Whoever has these perceptions, has the witness in himself, that he has been taught of God, and believes in his Son.

If you think this explanation is agreeable to the scripture, you will be satisfied that the witness spoken of in this passage, is very different from what some persons understand it to be. It is not an impulse, or strong persuasion impressed upon us in a way of which we can give no account, that "we are the children of God," and that our sins are freely forgiven; nor is the powerful application of a particular text of scripture necessary to produce it; neither is it always connected with a very lively, and sensible comfort. These things, in some persons, and instances, may accompany the witness or testimony we are speaking of, but do not properly belong to it; and they may be, and often have been, counterfeited. But what I have described is inimitable and infallible; it is indubitably, as the magicians confessed of the miracles of Moses, the finger of God, as certainly the effect of his divine power as the creation of the world. It is true, many who have this witness walk in darkness, and are harassed with many doubts and perplexities concerning their state; but this is not because the witness is not sufficient to give them satisfaction, but because they do not account it so; being misled by the influence of self-will and a legal spirit, they overlook this evidence as too simple, and expect something extraordinary; at least, they think they cannot be right, unless they are led in the same way in which the Lord has been pleased to lead others, with whom they may have conversed. But the Lord the Spirit is sovereign and free in his operations; and though he gives to all who are the subjects of his grace, the same views of sin, of themselves, and of the Saviour; yet with respect to the circumstantial of his work, there is,

as in the features of our faces, such an amazing variety, that perhaps no two persons can be found whose experiences have been exactly alike: but, as the apostle says, that “he that believeth,” that is, whosoever believeth, without exception, “has the witness in himself;” it must, consequently, arise from what is common to them all, and not from what is peculiar to a few.

Before I conclude, I would make two or three observations. In the first place, I think it is plain, that the supposition of a real believer’s living in sin, or taking encouragement from the gospel so to do, is destitute of the least foundation in truth, and can only proceed from an ignorance of the subject. Sin is the burden under which he groans; and he would account nothing short of a deliverance from it worthy the name of salvation. A principal part of his evidence, that he is a believer, arises from that abhorrence of sin which he habitually feels. It is true, sin still dwelleth in him; but he loathes and resists it: upon this account he is in a state of continual warfare; if he was not so, he could not have the witness in himself, that he is born of God.

Again, from hence arises a solid evidence, that the scripture is indeed the word of God, because it so exactly describes what is exemplified in the experience of all who are subjects of a work of grace. While we are in a natural state, it is to us as a sealed book; though we can read it, and perhaps assent to the facts, we can no more understand our own concerns in what we read, than if it was written in an unknown tongue. But when the mind is enlightened by the Holy Spirit, the scripture addresses us as it were by name, explains every difficulty under which we laboured, and proposes an adequate and effectual remedy for the relief of all our wants and fears.

Lastly, it follows, that the hope of a believer, is built upon a foundation that cannot be shaken, though it may, and will be, assaulted. It does not depend upon occasional and changeable frames, upon any that is precarious and questionable, but upon a correspondence and agreement with the written word. Nor does this agreement depend upon a train of laboured arguments and deductions, but is self-evident, as light is to the eye, to every person who has a real participation of the grace of God. It is equally suited to all capacities; by this the unlearned are enabled to know their election of God, and to “rejoice with a joy unspeakable and full of glory.” And the wisest, if destitute of this perception, though they may be masters of all the external evidences of Christianity, and able to combat the cavils of infidels, can see no real beauty in the truths of the gospel, nor derive any solid comfort from them.

I have only sent you a few hasty hints: it would be easy to enlarge; but I sat down, not to write a book, but a letter. May this inward witness preside

with power in our hearts, to animate our hopes, and to mortify our corruptions!

I am, &c.