

Assurance and Entire Sanctification

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There is no single theological term that embraces the understanding that God desires Christians to appropriate by faith, subsequent to their new birth, further provisions of Christ's atonement. However, every reader of Scripture will encounter commands such as the following:

- **Ephesians 5:18:** And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.
- **Romans 6:11-12:** Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. ¹² Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof.
- **Romans 12:1** I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, *which is* your reasonable service. ² And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what *is* that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

From an investigation of the immediate context of such commands, one can readily establish that they are addressed to people who are already Christians. Although these commands do not use the phrase, "entire sanctification," they address various aspects of a biblical truth that has been labeled by some Wesleyan theologians as passages that teach the basic concept of "entire sanctification."

The fact that God desires all Christians to be entirely sanctified is indicated by Paul's inspired prayer for the Thessalonian believers, "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and *I pray God* your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:23). God's willingness and ability to sanctify entirely Christians is expressed in the following verse, "Faithful *is* he that calls you, who also will do *it*" (1 Thess. 5:24).

As we examine the question, "How can I know for sure when I am entirely sanctified?" we find at least two ways Scripture offers a Christian assurance of entire sanctification. The first and primary way is through biblical faith in God's Word. The second way is through the direct witness of the Holy Spirit to the heart of the Christian assuring him that his life is fully surrendered to God, that he has been cleansed of self-centeredness (inherited depravity), and that the Holy Spirit has full control of his life.

I. Assurance of entire sanctification through biblical faith in God's Word.

The first and most fundamental way for a Christian to have assurance of entire sanctification is through biblical faith. The focus of biblical faith is God's written Word. For this reason the apostle Paul calls it "the word of faith" (Rom. 10:8). When believed, the "word of faith" effectually works in the one exercising faith (1 Thess. 2:13).¹

There are three indispensable elements to biblical faith. Hebrews 11:6 teaches us, "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek him." In addition to belief in God's existence, biblical faith requires us to believe that God has spoken to us through special revelation (the Bible). The phrase, "He is a rewarder of them that seek Him," implies: 1) a person must believe what God says ("He is a rewarder of them that seek Him"), 2) a person must obey what God requires ("seek Him"), and 3) a person must trust in and rest on what God promises ("He is a rewarder of them that seek Him"). Let's explore the implications of each of these three elements as applied to entire sanctification.

A. Biblical faith believes what God says.

The first element of biblical faith requires a mental assent to what God has said in Scripture. For example, when God commands Christians, "Be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18), one must believe that it is possible for Christians, who already have the Spirit dwelling in them (Rom. 8:9-11), to be "filled" with the Spirit. When God says to all Christians, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (Rom. 12:1), the Christian must believe that God really expects him to do this. When God inspired Paul to pray that the Thessalonian believers would experience God's provision of entire sanctification, and concluded his prayer with a sovereign promise from God, "Faithful is he that calls you, who also will do it" (1 Thess. 5:23, 24), the Christian is to believe that God wills all Christians to be entirely sanctified, and that our faithful God will entirely sanctify the believer (1 Thess. 5:24). Thus, the first requirement for assurance of entire sanctification through biblical faith is to believe what God says.

B. Biblical faith obeys what God requires.

The second element of biblical faith requires the act of the will—you must do what God requires. This step requires that the Christian, who is dead to sin and free from sin due to his union with Christ (Rom. 6:2, 7), reckon himself indeed dead unto sin, but alive unto God

¹ John Wesley's view of faith differs somewhat from the view being espoused in this paper. John Wesley believed that both saving faith and faith for entire sanctification was a special gift from God. Although Wesley believed the only way to be saved or entirely sanctified was by faith, faith in his understanding was not equivalent to simply resting on the promises of God. Wesley believed one sought until God granted the seeker the gift of faith, and this gift of faith always brought with it attendant feelings and certainty that he identified as the witness of the Spirit. This is why he would urge people who were seeking to be saved or entirely sanctified to press on in prayer, expecting to receive at any moment the gift of faith and the direct witness of the Spirit that accompanies faith.

through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 6:11).² The Christian must present his body to God as a living, holy, and acceptable sacrifice (Rom. 12:1). He must, by faith, turn over to the Holy Spirit's full control every aspect of his life (Eph. 5:18) thus responding to God's call to be entirely sanctified (1 Thess. 5:23, 24).

The Christian must not proceed to element three of biblical faith until he is sure he has successfully completed steps one and two. Successful completion is measured by a clear conscience and an unconditionally surrendered attitude of heart and mind toward God (this includes all things past, present, and everything God may wish to bring to mind in the future).

C. Biblical faith trusts in and rests on what God promises.

The third element of biblical faith requires one to "trust in" and "rest on" what God promises. One "trusts in" what God has promised because God's Word is immutable and eternal (Psa. 119:89). "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (Luke 21:33; Mat. 24:35). Further, Hebrews 11:1 tells us that biblical faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." The words "substance" (*hupostasis*) and "evidence" (*elegchos*) are better translated "confidence" and "certainty" respectively. Faith brings confident certainty.

A person has not exercised biblical faith if he is not able with complete confidence to trust God to do what He promised. For example, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness" (Rom. 4:3). When God told him he was going to give him a son, Abraham, without any outward proof chose to believe God simply because He had said it. As a result, God counted Abraham's faith for righteousness. Paul tells us that Abraham, "in hope against hope" believed (Rom. 4:18). Abraham did not look to himself or to others for assurance. He simply believed God because God cannot lie (Titus. 1:2). He fought off doubts and did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God (Rom. 4:19, 20).

What has God promised the Christian about entire sanctification? We can infer from Scripture that God has promised the Christian that He will sanctify him entirely (1 Thess. 5:23, 24), that He will fill him with His Spirit (Eph. 5:18), that He will empower him to be the witness that He desires him to be (Acts 1:8), and that He will purify his heart by faith (Acts 15:9).

To trust in God enables the Christian to "rest on" what God has promised. The act of resting on God's Word produces a calm assurance within the heart of the believer. By the phrase, "calm assurance," I am emphasizing that a person can know when he is at rest, fully trusting the promises of God's Word, and therefore can be confident that God has done what He promised He would do.

² Notice, this is something the Christian must do for himself. There is no mention of any attendant feelings one should expect as the result of obeying God's command.

If a person is having a battle of faith, he will be assailed with doubts and fears about how he can know for sure that God has entirely sanctified him. A Christian must fight off such doubts and fears. One does this by meditating on the unchanging and fully trustworthy character of God, upon His unfailing promises, and by reading testimonies of other people who have been entirely sanctified.³ Although none of the testimonies are to be taken as the pattern for God's entirely sanctifying work in us (2 Cor. 10:12), such testimonies can be helpful in fighting off doubts and fears by reminding one that many people from all walks of life, and from greatly differing theological perspectives, have personally experienced entire sanctification.

Until a person has settled it in his heart and mind that God is fully trustworthy and always does what He promises, he will not be able to trust in and rest on His promises. However, when a person's faith reaches the place of "resting on" God's promises, such a person can say with utmost confidence and assurance, "I am resting on the promises of God and thereby am confident He will do what He promised to do." Paul tells us that joy and peace are the fruits of biblical faith: "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing . . ." (Romans 15:13).

Summary statement: The first and most fundamental way for a Christian to have assurance of entire sanctification is through biblical faith.⁴ The focus of biblical faith is God's written Word.

II. Assurance of entire sanctification through the witness of the Spirit.

A second way Scripture offers a Christian assurance of entire sanctification is through the witness of the Holy Spirit. It is important to observe, however, that strictly speaking all of the Scriptures which speak of the witness of the Spirit are speaking of assurance in relationship to the new birth and do not address the assurance of being entirely sanctified. However, since one is saved by faith, and subsequent to the new birth entirely sanctified by faith, one can logically argue that if God provides a witness of His Spirit as a means of assurance of being saved, He will

³ See for example, V. Raymond Edman, *They Found the Secret*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 1984.

⁴ Ephesians 2:8 is one of the classic passages in the New Testament on the role of grace, faith, and salvation. Paul wrote, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God." The word "grace" (χάρις) is feminine, "saved" (σεσωσμένοι) is a masculine plural participle, and "faith" (πίστις) is feminine. The demonstrative pronoun "it" (τοῦτο) is neuter. If the referent of "it" (τοῦτο) were faith (πίστεως) or grace (χάριτι) or both, then we would expect τοῦτο to be feminine, thus agreeing in gender with its referent. However, since it is neuter, it most likely refers to the entire preceding clause, encompassing faith, grace, and God's saving work. That faith is a gift of God is not in dispute for Paul said, "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Phil. 1:29). However, in contrast with Wesley's understanding that one seeking salvation or entire sanctification must wait for God's special bestowal of faith in order to "savingly" believe, I understand that the presence of desire in a person who wishes to be saved or entirely sanctified is evidence of the prevenient grace of God that also enables belief (Phil. 2:12-13). Thus, if God has granted you the grace for desire, He has also granted you the grace for faith. For further syntactical discussion of Ephesians 2:8, see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 334-335.

also provide a witness of His Spirit to the reality of being entirely sanctified. With this logical premise in mind, let us examine what the Bible says about the witness of the Spirit.

There are three key passages that speak of the role of the Holy Spirit in giving assurance to one's salvation: Romans 8:15-16, Hebrews 10:15-16, and 1 John 5:9-13. Each of these passages are important for developing a balanced understanding of how the Holy Spirit witnesses. Let's begin with Romans 8:15-16 and weave the other two passages into our discussion.

A. The Witness of the Spirit to our Salvation.

Romans 8:15-16 says, "For you have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but you have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God."

As we examine this passage, we observe first that there are two agents of witnessing: the Holy Spirit and the human spirit. Second, the testimony of the two agents of witnessing must agree that we are the children of God. Third, the activity of each agent of witnessing is different, but both are necessary for assurance.

1. There are Two Agents of Witnessing: the Holy Spirit and the Human Spirit -- "the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God."

Almost every English translation of Romans 8:16 agree that there are two agents of witnessing. Except for the New English Translation (NET), the majority of the translations agree that the Holy Spirit bears witness, and our human spirit also bears witness. The two agents of witnessing bear witness together. The reason for this understanding is that the verb translated 'witness' is *summarturei*—a compound verb composed of (*martureo*) 'to witness' and the preposition (*sun*) 'with'. Literally translated, it says the Holy Spirit witnesses **with** my spirit, and not **to** my spirit (see KJV, NASB, NIV, NLT, NRS). In other words, there are two distinctly different witnesses involved.⁵

2. The Agreement of the Two Agents who Witness – "the Spirit" and "our spirit"

Why does Paul tell us that two distinctly different agents bear witness together of the reality of our being the children of God? The most likely reason is the requirement of Scripture itself. God says in Deuteronomy 19:15, "in the mouth of two or three witnesses a matter shall be established." Jesus reiterated the importance of at least two witnesses to verify truth when he said, "truly, in the mouth of two or three witnesses a matter is established" (Matthew 18:16). Therefore, in establishing the certainty of one's relationship with God, Paul tells us that

⁵ For an opposing viewpoint, see Daniel Wallace, "The Witness of the Spirit in Romans 8:16: Interpretation and Implications," <http://bible.org/seriespage/witness-spirit-romans-816-interpretation-and-implications>.

we have the two witnesses necessary for assurance: the witness of the *Holy Spirit*, and the witness of *our* spirit. These two witnesses testify to the same fact—that we are the children of God—thereby producing assurance.

3. The Activity of Each Agent of Witnessing -- the Holy Spirit and the Human Spirit.

a. The witness of our human spirit.

How does the human spirit bear witness to the certainty of our relationship with God? Scripture tells us that the human spirit bears witness through the testimony of a continually clear conscience, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, that we are fully obeying God (1 Tim. 1:19-20; Acts 24:16; 2 Corinthians 1:12; 1 John 1:7). 1 John 2:3 tells us that “we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.” To “know that we know him” brings inward assurance. But in addition to the testimony of our own human spirit, we must have the additional witness of the Holy Spirit.

b. The witness of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit witnesses to our relationship with God in two distinct ways. He witnesses “mediately” through Holy Scripture, and “immediately” by inward feelings. Let’s first look at the passages that teach the Holy Spirit witnesses to our sonship mediately by means of the written Scriptures, and then we will discuss the immediate witness of the Spirit through feelings.

1). The mediate witness of the Holy Spirit.

Hebrews 10:15-16 says, “The Holy Spirit also witnesses [*marturei*] to us about this. First he [the Holy Spirit] says: ‘This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.’” The author of the Letter to the Hebrews quotes from Jeremiah 31:33 and then tells us that written Scripture is actually the Holy Spirit witnessing to us. This witness is mediated to us through Scripture. The author further tells us that that one must receive the witness of the Holy Spirit to us through Scripture by faith in order for the truth of Scripture to effectively work in us (Heb. 4:2). He says, “For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached [the Holy Spirit’s witness to them] did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.” This means that although the witness of the Holy Spirit to the Israelites in the desert came through preaching (the oral Word of God), it was indeed God’s Word and thus the witness of the Holy Spirit to the people of Israel was mediated through Scripture.

When one receives by faith the mediated witness of the Holy Spirit through Scripture, he has received the witness of God. This is confirmed by 1 John 5:9-11, “If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of

God which he has witnessed concerning his Son. He that believes on the Son of God has the witness in himself: he that believes not God has made him a liar; because he believes not the witness that God gave of his Son. And this is the witness, that God gave us eternal life and this life is in his Son.” The apostle John tells us that belief in God’s word results in an internal witness (“the witness in himself”), and this internal witness produces assurance that we have received eternal life through the person of the indwelling Christ.⁶

Although this text addresses assurance regarding salvation, it seems reasonable to assume that the principle the apostle John enunciates would apply to entire sanctification as well. Therefore, receiving the witness of the Spirit mediated to us through Scripture about entire sanctification will result in an internal witness, which in the case of entire sanctification would be the empowering control of the Spirit, i.e., the fullness of the Spirit in us (Eph. 5:18-21, Acts 1:8). Thus the mediate witness of the Holy Spirit that comes through God’s Word, when acted upon by faith, becomes an internal subjective witness of the Holy Spirit within the believer’s heart.

2). The immediate witness of the Holy Spirit .

The Bible also speaks of an assurance that comes to us by the Holy Spirit apart from Scripture—a divinely imparted inner consciousness that God has saved us, or that God has entirely sanctified us, and that we are pleasing Him (Rom. 8:16; Gal. 4:6). This direct witness of the Spirit is not always perceived immediately upon conversion or at the moment of entire sanctification. But sooner or later, the Holy Spirit will witness to our hearts that He is pleased with us. The universal testimony of the church is that the awareness of this direct witness of the Spirit is not an abiding, always present, conscious perception. Sometimes it is very clear, and at other times, especially during times of sickness or Satanic oppression, it is not discernable at all. Further, one cannot dictate to God the timing of the witness nor the form in which this direct assurance comes.

⁶ Grant Osborne and Philip W. Comfort, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 13: John and 1, 2, and 3 John*, "With the Entire Text of the New Living Translation." (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2007), 369. Other commentators who concur that John is speaking of a subjective internal witness of God’s Spirit in 1 John 5:10 include: Thomas F. Johnson, *New International Biblical Commentary: 1, 2, and 3 John*, "Based on the New International Version." (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 129; *The Epistles of St. John: The Greek Text With Notes and Essays*, ed. Brooke Foss Westcott, 4th ed. (London; New York: Macmillan, 1902), 186; Walter A. Elwell, vol. 3, *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, Baker reference library (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1996, c1989), 1 Jn 5:6; ⁶Glenn W. Barker, "1 John" In , in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 12: Hebrews Through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 352; David Walls and Max Anders, vol. 11, *I & II Peter, I, II & III John, Jude*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 224. For contra, see Morris M. Womack, *The College Press NIV Commentary : 1, 2 & 3 John / Morris M. Womack* (Joplin, MO.: College Press, 1998), 1 Jn 5:10.

John Wesley confesses the mistake he and his fellow Methodist ministers made during the early years of their preaching on the importance of the witness of the Spirit for assurance for salvation. Speaking of his ministers he wrote, "They were apt to make sad the hearts of those whom God had not made sad. For they frequently asked those who feared God, 'Do you know that your sins are forgiven?' [In other words, do you have a direct witness of the Holy Spirit that you are forgiven]. And upon their answering, 'No,' immediately replied, 'Then you are a child of the devil.'"⁷

John Wesley and his fellow Methodist ministers later modified their view of the spiritual condition of a person who has not yet received the direct witness of the Holy Spirit. John Wesley explained that they had not clearly understood the teaching in Acts 10:35 which affirms that whoever fears God and works righteousness is accepted of God.⁸ Instead of condemning the seeker, Wesley would affirm the progress the seeker had made and then tell the seeker to keep walking in the light and not to doubt God. He assured them that they were no longer under the wrath of God and that sooner or later they would receive the direct witness of the Spirit.⁹

Conclusion.

Because of the variableness of one's perception of the direct witness of the Spirit, this means of assurance, although thoroughly Scriptural and important, is not to be our primary basis of assurance. Faith in God Word is to be our primary basis of assurance. To rely on one's perception of having the direct witness of the Spirit for assurance for either the new birth or entire sanctification, would make a person susceptible to fear and unbelief whenever he could not sense the direct witness of the Spirit. Paul makes it clear in Romans 1:17 that the just shall live by faith, not by feelings. The assurance that comes from believing God's Word is the stabilizing, constant, abiding basis for assurance that we are saved and likewise the basis for assurance that we are entirely sanctified.¹⁰

⁷ John Wesley, *On Faith*, in *The Sermons of Wesley*, Sermon 106, p. 218.

⁸ Acts 10:35: "But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him."

⁹ Wesley, *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Richard S. Taylor, *Exploring Christian Holiness*, Vol. 3, *The Theological Formulation*, (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1985), 181. Taylor writes, "Neither can the emphasis on the Word of God as the true ground of assurance be challenged."