

The Indwelling of the Spirit, the Common Privilege of All Believers

By George Whitefield

Sermon 38

John 7:37–39 — “In the last day, that great [day] of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive.”

Nothing has rendered the cross of Christ of less effect; nothing has been a greater stumbling-block and rock of offense to weak minds, than a supposition, now current among us, that most of what is contained in the gospel of Jesus Christ, was designed only for our Lord's first and immediate followers, and consequently calculated but for one or two hundred years. Accordingly, many now read the life, sufferings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in the same manner as Caesar's Commentaries, or the Conquests of Alexander are read: as things rather intended to afford matter for speculation, than to be acted over again in and by us.

As this is true of the doctrines of the gospel in general, so it is of the operation of God's Spirit upon the hearts of believers in particular; for we no sooner mention the necessity of our receiving the Holy Ghost in these last days, as well as formerly, but we are looked upon by some, as enthusiasts and madmen; and by others, represented as willfully deceiving the people, and undermining the established constitution of the church.

Judge ye then, whether it is not high time for the true ministers of Jesus, who have been made partakers of this heavenly gift, to lift up their voices like a trumpet; and

if they would not have those souls perish, for which the Lord Jesus has shed his precious blood, to declare, with all boldness, that the Holy Spirit is the common privilege and portion of all believers in all ages; and that we as well as the first Christians, must receive the Holy Ghost, before we can be truly called the children of God.

For this reason, (and also that I might answer the design of our church in appointing the present festival [Whitsuntide]) I have chosen the words of the text.

They were spoken by Jesus Christ, when he was at the feast of tabernacles. Our Lord attended on the temple-service in general, and the festivals of the Jewish church in particular. The festival at which he was now present, was that of the feast of tabernacles, which the Jews observed according to God's appointment in commemoration of their living in tents. At the last day of this feast, it was customary for many pious people to fetch water from a certain place, and bring it on their heads, singing this anthem out of Isaiah, "And with joy shall they draw water out of the wells of salvation." Our Lord observing this, and it being his constant practice to spiritualize every thing he met with, cries out, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, (rather than unto that well) and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath spoken, (where it is said, God will make water to spring out of a dry rock, and such-like) out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." And that we might know what our Savior meant by this living water, the Evangelist immediately adds, "But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive."

The last words I shall chiefly insist on in the ensuing discourse: And

First, I shall briefly show, what is meant by the word "Spirit."

Secondly, That this Spirit is the common privilege of all believers.

Thirdly, I shall show the reason on which this doctrine is founded. And

Lastly, Conclude with a general exhortation to believe on Jesus Christ, whereby alone we can receive the Spirit.

First, I am to show, what is meant by the word Spirit.

By the Spirit, is evidently to be understood the Holy Ghost, the third person in the ever-blessed Trinity, consubstantial and co-eternal with the Father and the Son, proceeding from, yet equal to them both. For, to use the words of our Church in this day's office, that which we believe of the glory of the Father, the same we believe of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, without any difference or inequality.

Thus, says St. John, in his first epistle, chap. 5, ver. 7, "There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one." And our Lord, when he gave his Apostles commission to go and teach all nations, commanded them to baptize in the name of the Holy Ghost, as well as of the Father and the Son. And St. Peter, Acts v. 3 said to Ananias, "Why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost?" And ver. 4 he says, "Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God." From all which passages, it is plain, that the Holy Ghost, is truly and properly God, as well as the Father and the Son. This is an unspeakable mystery, but a mystery of God's revealing, and, therefore, to be assented to with our whole hearts: seeing God is not a man that he should lie, nor the son of man that he should deceive. I proceed,

Secondly, To prove that the Holy Ghost is the common privilege of all believers.

But, here I would not be understood of to receiving the Holy Ghost, as to enable us to work miracles, or show outward signs and wonders. I allow our adversaries, that pretend to be inspired, in this sense, is being wise above what is written. Perhaps it cannot be proved, that God ever interposed in this extraordinary manner, but when some new revelation was to be established, as at the first settling of the Mosaic and gospel dispensation: and as for my own part, I cannot but suspect the spirit of those who insist upon a repetition of such miracles at this time. For the world

being now become nominally Christian, (though, God knows, little of the power is left among us) there need not outward miracles, but only an inward co-operation of the Holy Spirit with the word, to prove that Jesus is the Messiah which was to come into the world.

Besides, if it was possible for thee, O man, to have faith, so as to be able to remove mountains, or cast out devils; nay, couldst thou speak with the tongue of men and angels, yea, and bid the sun stand still in the midst of heaven; what would all these gifts of the Spirit avail thee, without being made partaker of his sanctifying graces? Saul had the spirit of government for a while, so as to become another man, and yet probably was a cast-away. And many, who cast out devils, in Christ's name, at the last will be disowned by him. If therefore, thou hadst only the gifts, and was destitute of the graces of the Holy Ghost, they would only serve to lead thee with so much the more solemnity to hell.

Here then we join issue with our adversaries, and will readily grant, that we are not in this sense to be inspired, as were our Lord's first Apostles. But unless men have eyes which see not, and ears that hear not, how can they read the latter part of the text, and not confess that the Holy Spirit, in another sense, is the common privilege of all believers, even to the end of the world? "This spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive." Observe, he does not say, they that believe on him for one or two ages, but they that believe on him in general, or, at all times, and in all places. So that, unless we can prove, that St. John was under a delusion when he wrote these words, we must believe that even we also, shall receive the Holy Ghost, if we believe on the Lord Jesus with our whole hearts.

Again, our Lord, just before his bitter passion, when he was about to offer up his soul an offering for the sins of the elect world; when his heart was most enlarged and he would undoubtedly demand the most excellent gift for his disciples, prays,

“That they all may be one, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee; that they also may be one in us, I in them, and thou in me; that they may be made perfect in one;” that is, that all his true followers might be united to him by his holy Spirit, by as real, vital, and mystical an union, as there was between Jesus Christ and the Father. I say all his true followers; for it is evident, from our Lord's own words, that he had us, and all believers, in view, when he put up this prayer; “Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word;” so that, unless we treat our Lord as the high priests did, and count him a blasphemer, we must confess, that all who believe in Jesus Christ, through the word, or ministration of his servants, are to be joined to Jesus Christ, by being made partakers of the Holy Spirit.

A great noise hath been made of late, about the word enthusiast, and it has been cast upon the preachers of the gospel, as a term of reproach; but every Christian, in the proper sense of the word, must be an enthusiast; that is, must be inspired of God or have God, by his Spirit, in him. St. Peter tells us, “we have many great and precious promises, that we may be made partakers of the divine nature;” our Lord prays, “that we may be one, as the Father and he are one;” and our own church, in conformity to these texts of Scripture, in her excellent communion-office, tells us, that those who receive the sacrament worthily, “dwell in Christ, and Christ in them; that they are one with Christ, and Christ with them.” And yet, Christians must have their names cast out as evil, and ministers in particular, must be looked upon as deceivers of the people, for affirming, that we must be really united to God, by receiving the Holy Ghost. Be astonished, O heavens, at this!

Indeed, I will not say, all our letter-learned preachers deny this doctrine in express words; but however, they do in effect; for they talk professedly against inward feelings, and say, we may have God's Spirit without feeling it, which is in reality to deny the thing itself. And had I a mind to hinder the progress of the gospel, and

to establish the kingdom of darkness, I would go about, telling people, they might have the Spirit of God, and yet not feel it.

But to return: When our Lord was about to ascend to his Father and our Father, to his God and our God he gave his apostles this commission, “Go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” And accordingly, by authority of this commission, we do teach and baptize in this, and every age of the church. And though we translate the words, “baptizing them in the name;” yet, as the name of God, in the Lord's prayer, and several other places, signifies his nature, they might as well be translated thus, “baptizing them into the nature of the Father, into the nature of the Son, and into the nature of the Holy Ghost.” Consequently, if we are all to be baptized into the nature of the Holy Ghost, before our baptism be effectual to salvation, it is evident, that we all must actually receive the Holy Ghost, and ere we can say, we truly believe in Jesus Christ. For no one can say, that Jesus is my Lord, but he that has thus received the Holy Ghost.

Numbers of other texts might be quoted to make this doctrine, if possible, still more plain; but I am astonished, that any who call themselves members; much more, that many, who are preachers in the church of England, should dare so much as to open their lips against it. And yet, with grief I speak it, God is my Judge, persons of the established church seem more generally to be ignorant of it, than any dissenters whatsoever.

But, my dear brethren, what have you been doing? How often have your hearts given your lips the lie how often have you offered to God the sacrifice of fools, and had your prayers turned into sin, if you approve of, and use our church-liturgy, and yet deny the Holy Spirit to be the portion of all believers? In the daily absolution, the minister exhorts the people to pray, that “God would grant them repentance, and his Holy Spirit:” in the Collect for Christmas day, we beseech

God, “that he would daily renew us by his Holy Spirit;” in the last week's Collect, we prayed that “we may evermore rejoice in the comforts of the Holy Ghost;” and in the concluding prayer, which we put up every day, we pray, not only that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, but that “the fellowship of the Holy Ghost” may be with us all evermore.

But further, a solemn season, to some, is not approaching; I mean the Easter-days, at the end of which, all that are to be ordained to the office of a deacon, are in the sight of God, and in the presence of the congregation, to declare, that “they trust they are inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost, to take upon them that administration;” and to those, who are to be ordained priests, the bishop is to repeat these solemn words, “Receive thou the Holy Ghost, now committed unto them, by the imposition of our hands.” And yet, O that I had no reason to speak it, many that use our forms, and many who have witnessed this good confession, yet dare to both talk and preach against the necessity of receiving the Holy Ghost now; and not only so, but cry out against those, who do insist upon it, as madmen, enthusiasts, schismatics, and underminers of the established constitution.

But you are the schismatics, you are the bane of the church of England, who are always crying out, “the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord;” and yet starve the people out of our communion, by feeding them only with the dry husks of dead morality, and not bringing out to them the fatted calf; I mean, the doctrines of the operations of the blessed Spirit of God. But here is the misfortune; many of us are not led by, and therefore no wonder that we cannot talk feelingly of, the Holy Ghost; we subscribe to our articles, and make them serve for a key to get into church-preferment, and then preach contrary to those very articles to which we have subscribed. Far be it from me, to charge all the clergy with this hateful hypocrisy; no, blessed be God, there are some left among us, who dare maintain the doctrines of the Reformation, and preach the truth as it is in Jesus. But I speak the truth in Christ, I lie not; the generality of the clergy are fallen from our articles,

and do not speak agreeable to them, or to the form of sound words delivered in the Scriptures; woe be unto such blind leaders of the blind! How can you escape the damnation of hell? It is not all your learning (falsely so called) it is not all your preferments can keep you from the just judgment of God. Yet a little while, and we shall all appear before the tribunal of Christ; there, there will I meet you; there Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd and Bishop of souls, shall determine who are the false prophets; who are the wolves in sheep's clothing. Those who say, that we must now receive and feel the Holy Ghost, or those who exclaim against it, as the doctrine of devils.

But I can no more; it is an displeasing talk to censure any order of men, especially those who are in the ministry; nor would any thing excuse it but necessity: that necessity which extorted from our Lord himself so many woes against the Scribes and Pharisees, the letter-learned rulers and teachers of the Jewish church; and surely, if I could bear to see people perish for lack of knowledge, and yet be silent towards those who keep from them the key of true knowledge, the very stones would cry out.

Would we restore the church to its primitive dignity, the only way is to live and preach the doctrine of Christ, and the articles to which we have subscribed; then we shall find the number of dissenters will daily decrease, and the church of England become the joy of the whole earth.

I am, in the Third place, to show the reasonableness of this doctrine.

I say, the reasonableness of this doctrine; for however it may seem foolishness to the natural man, yet to those, who have tasted of the good word of life, and have felt the power of the world to come, it will appear to be founded on the highest reason; and is capable, to those who have eyes to see, even of a demonstration; I say of demonstration: for it stands on this self-evident truth, that we are fallen creatures, or, to use the scripture-expression, "have all died in Adam."

I know indeed, it is now no uncommon thing amongst us, to deny the doctrine of original sin, as well as the divinity of Jesus Christ; but it is incumbent on those who deny it, first to disprove the authority of the holy Scriptures; if thou canst prove, thou unbeliever, that the book, which we call The Bible, does not contain the lively oracles of God; if thou canst show, that holy men of old, did not write this book, as they were inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost, then will we give up the doctrine of original sin; but unless thou canst do this, we must insist upon it, that we are all conceived and born in sin; if for no other, yet for this one reason, because that God, who cannot lie, has told us so.

But what has light to do with darkness, or polite infidels with the Bible? Alas! as they are strangers to the power, so they are generally as great strangers to the word of God. And therefore, if we will preach to them, we must preach to and from the heart: for talking in the language of scripture, to them, is but like talking in an unknown tongue. Tell me then, O man, whosoever thou art, that deniest the doctrine of original sin, if thy conscience be not seared as with a hot iron! Tell me, if thou dost not find thyself, by nature, to be a mostly mixture of brute and devil? I know these terms will stir up the whole Pharisee in thy heart; but let not Satan hurry thee hence; stop a little, and let us reason together; dost thou not find, that by nature thou art prone to pride? Otherwise, wherefore art thou now offended? Again, dost not thou find in thyself the seeds of malice, revenge, and all uncharitableness? And what are these but the very tempers of the devil? Again, do we not all by nature follow, and suffer ourselves to be led by our natural appetites, always looking downwards, never looking upwards to that God, in whom we live, move, and have our being? And what is this but the very nature of the beasts that perish? Out of thy own heart, therefore, will I oblige thee to confess, what an inspired apostle has long since told us, that “the whole world (by nature) lies in the wicked one;” we are no better than those whom St. Jude calls “brute beasts;” for

we have tempers in us all by nature, that prove to a demonstration, that we are earthly, sensual, devilish.

And this will serve as another argument, to prove the reality of the operations of the blessed Spirit on the hearts of believers, against those false professors, who deny there is any such thing as influences of the Holy Spirit, that may be felt. For if they will grant that the devil worketh, and so as to be felt in the hearts of the children of disobedience (which they must grant, unless they will give an apostle the lie) where is the wonder that the good Spirit should have the same power over those who are truly obedient to the faith of Jesus Christ?

If it be true then; that we are all by nature, since the fall, a mixture of brute and devil, it is evident, that we all must receive the Holy Ghost, ere we can dwell with and enjoy God.

When you read, how the prodigal, in the gospel, was reduced to so low a condition, as to eat husks with swine, and how Nebuchadnezzar was turned out, to graze with oxen; I am confident, you pity their unhappy state. And when you hear, how Jesus Christ will say, at the last day, to all that are not born again of God, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels," do not your hearts shrink within you, with a secret horror? And if creatures, with only our degree of goodness, cannot bear even the thoughts of dwelling with beasts or devils, to whose nature we are so nearly allied, how do we imagine God, who is infinite goodness, and purity itself, can dwell with us, while we are partakers of both their natures? We might as well think to reconcile heaven and hell.

When Adam had eaten the forbidden fruit, he fled and hid himself from God; why? Because he was naked; he was alienated from the life of God, the due punishment of his disobedience. Now, we are all by nature naked and void of God,

as he was at that time, and consequently, until we are changed, renewed, and clothed with a divine nature again, we must fly from God also.

Hence then appears the reasonableness of our being obliged to receive the Spirit of God. It is founded on the doctrine of original sin: and, therefore, you will always find, that those who talk against feeling the operations of the Holy Ghost, very rarely, or slightly at least, mention our fall in Adam; no, they refer St. Paul's account of the depravity of unbelievers, only to those of old time. Whereas it is obvious, on the contrary, that we are all equally included under the guilt and consequences of our first parent's sin, even as others; and to use the language of our own church-article, "bring into the world with us, a corruption, which renders us liable to God's wrath, and eternal damnation."

Should I preach to you any other doctrine, I should wrong my own soul; I should be found a false witness towards God and you; and he that preaches any other doctrine, howsoever dignified and distinguished, shall bear his punishment, whosoever he be.

From this plain reason then appears the necessity why we, as well as the first apostles, in this sense, must receive the Spirit of God.

For the great work of sanctification, or making us holy, is particularly reserved to the Holy Ghost; therefore, our Lord says, "Unless a man be born of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

Jesus Christ came down to save us, not only from the guilt, but also from the power of sin: and however often we have repeated our creed, and told God we believe in the Holy Ghost, yet, if we have not believed in him, so as to be really united to Jesus Christ by him, we have no more concord with Jesus Christ than Belial himself.

And now, my brethren, what shall I say more? Tell me, are not many of you offended at what has been said already? Do not some of you think, though I mean well, yet I have carried the point a little too far? Are not others ready to cry out, if this be true, who then can be saved? Is not this driving people into despair?

Yes, I ingenuously confess it is; but into what despair? A despair of mercy through Christ? No, God forbid; but a despair of living with God without receiving the Holy Ghost. And I would to God, that not only all you that hear me this day, but that the whole world was filled with this despair. Believe me, I have been doing no more than you allow your bodily physicians to do every day: if you have a wound, and are in earnest about a cure, you bid the surgeon probe it to the very bottom; and shall not the physician of your souls be allowed the same freedom? What have I been doing but searching your natural wounds, that I might convince you of your danger, and put you upon applying to Jesus Christ for a remedy? Indeed I have dealt with you as gently as I could; and now I have wounded, I will attempt to heal you. For I was in the

Last place, to exhort you all to come to Jesus Christ by faith, whereby you, even you also, shall receive the Holy Ghost. “For this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive.”

This, this is what I long to come to. Hitherto I have been preaching only the law; but behold I bring you glad tidings of great joy. If I have wounded you, be not afraid; behold, I now bring a remedy for all your wounds. Notwithstanding you are sunk into the nature of the beast and devil, yet, if you truly believe on Jesus Christ, you shall receive the quickening Spirit promised in the text, and be restored to the glorious liberties of the sons of God; I say, if you believe on Jesus Christ. “For by faith we are saved; it is not of works, lest any one should boast.” And, however some men may say, there is a fitness required in the creature, and that we must have a righteousness of our own, before we can lay hold on the righteousness of

Christ; yet, if we believe the scripture, salvation is the free gift of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord; and whosoever believeth on him with his whole heart, though his soul be as black as hell itself, shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. Behold then, I stand up, and cry out in this great day of the feast, let every one that thirsteth come unto Jesus Christ and drink. “He that believeth on him, out of his belly shall flow (not only streams of rivulets, but whole) rivers of living water.” This I speak of the Spirit, which they that believe on Jesus shall certainly receive. For Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and for ever; he is the way, the truth, the resurrection, and the life; “whosoever believeth on him, though he were dead, yet shall he live.”

There is no respect of persons with Jesus Christ; high and low, rich and poor, one with another, may come to him with an humble confidence, if they draw near by faith; from him we may all receive grace upon grace; for Jesus Christ is full of grace and truth, and ready to save to the uttermost, all that by a true faith turn unto him. Indeed, the poor generally receive the gospel, and “God has chosen the poor in this world, rich in faith.” But though not many mighty, not many noble are called; and though it be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God, yet, even to you that are rich, do I now freely offer salvation, by Jesus Christ, if you will renounce yourselves, and come to Jesus Christ as poor sinners; I say, as poor sinners; for the “poor in spirit” are only so blessed, as to have a right to the kingdom of God. And Jesus Christ calls none to him, but those who thirst after his righteousness, and feel themselves weary, and heavy laden with the burden of their sins. Jesus Christ justifies the ungodly; he came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Do not then say you are unworthy, for this is a faithful and true saying, and worthy of all men to be received, “that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners;” and if you are the chief of sinners, if you feel yourselves such, verily Jesus Christ came into the world chiefly to save you. When Joseph was called out of the

prison-house to Pharaoh's court, we are told, that he stayed some time to prepare himself; but do you come with all your prison clothes about you; come poor, and miserable, and blind, and naked, as you are, and God the Father shall receive you with open arms, as was the returning prodigal. He shall cover your nakedness with the best robe of his dear Son's righteousness, shall seal you with the signet of his Spirit, and feed you with the fatted calf, even with the comforts of the Holy Ghost.

O, let there then be joy in heaven over some of you, as believing; let me not go back to my Master, and say, Lord, they will not believe my report. Harden no longer your hearts, but open them wide, and let the King of glory enter in; believe me, I am willing to go to prison or death for you; but I am not willing to go to heaven without you. The love of Jesus Christ constrains me to lift up my voice like a trumpet. My heart is not full; out of the abundance of the love which I have for your precious and immortal souls, my mouth now speaketh; and I could now not only continue my discourse until midnight, but I could speak until I could speak no more. And why should I despair of any? No, I can despair of no one, when I consider Jesus Christ has had mercy on such a wretch as I am; but the free grace of Christ prevented me; he saw me in my blood, he passed by me, and said unto me, "Live;" and the same grace which is sufficient for me, is sufficient for you also; behold, the same blessed Spirit is ready to breathe on all your dry bones, if you will believe on Jesus Christ, whom God has sent; indeed, you can never believe on, or serve a better master, one that is more mighty, or more willing to save; I can say, the Lord Christ is gracious, his yoke is easy, his burden exceeding light; after you have served him many years, like the servants under the law, was he willing to discharge you, you would say, we love our Master, and will not go from him.

Come then, my guilty brethren, come and believe on the Lord that bought you with his precious blood; look up by faith, and see him whom you have pierced; behold him bleeding, panting, dying! Behold him with arms stretched out ready to receive you all; cry unto him as the penitent thief did, Lord, remember us now

thou art in thy kingdom, and he shall say to your souls, shortly shall you be with me in paradise. For those whom Christ justified, them he also glorifies, even with that glory which he enjoyed with the Father, before the world began.

Do not say, I have bought a piece of ground, and must needs go see it; or I have bought a yoke of oxen, and must needs go prove them; or I have married a wife, I am engaged in an eager pursuit after the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, that therefore cannot come. Do not fear having your name cast out as evil, or being accounted a fool for Christ's sake; yet a little while, and you shall shine like the stars in the firmament for ever. Only believe, and Jesus Christ shall be to you wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and eternal redemption; your bodies shall be fashioned like unto his glorious body, and your souls be partakers of all the fullness of God.

Which God of his infinite mercy, grant &c.

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