

Marks of Having Received the Holy Ghost

By George Whitefield

Sermon 42

Acts 19:2 — “Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?”

Two different significations have been given of these words. Some have supposed, that the question here put, is, Whether these disciples, whom St. Paul found at Ephesus, had received the Holy Ghost by imposition of hands at confirmation? Others think, these disciples had been already baptized into John's baptism; which not being attended with an immediate effusion of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle here asks them, Whether they had received the Holy Ghost by being baptized into Jesus Christ? And upon their answering in the negative, he first baptized, and then confirmed them in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Which of these interpretations is the most true, is neither easy nor very necessary to determine. However, as the words contain a most important inquiry, without any reference to the context, I shall from them,

First, Show who the Holy Ghost here spoken of, is; and that we must all receive him, before we can be stiled true believers.

Secondly, I shall lay down some scripture marks whereby we may know, whether we have thus received the Holy Ghost or not. And

Thirdly, By way of conclusion, address myself to several distinct classes of professors, concerning the doctrine that shall have been delivered.

First, I am to show who the Holy Ghost spoken of in the text, is; and that we must all receive him before we can be stiled true believers.

By the Holy Ghost is plainly signified the Holy Spirit, 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. He is emphatically called Holy, because infinitely holy in himself, and the author and finisher of all holiness in us.

This blessed Spirit, who once moved on the face of the great deep; who overshadowed the blessed Virgin before that holy child was born of her; who descended in a bodily shape, like a dove, on our blessed Lord, when he came up out of the water at his baptism; and afterwards came down in fiery tongues on the heads of all his Apostles at the day of Pentecost: this is the Holy Ghost, who must move on the faces of our souls; this power of the Most High, must come upon us, and we must be baptized with his baptism and refining fire, before we can be stiled true members of Christ's mystical body.

Thus says the Apostle Paul, "Know ye not that Jesus Christ is in you, (that is, by his Spirit) unless you are reprobates?" And, "If any man hath not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his," And again, says St. John, "We know that we are his, by the Spirit that he hath given us."

It is not, indeed, necessary that we should have the Spirit now given in that miraculous manner, in which he was at first given to our Lord's Apostles, by signs and wonders, but it is absolutely necessary, that we should receive the Holy Ghost in his sanctifying graces, as really as they did: and so will it continue to be till the end of the world.

For this stands the case between God and man: God at first made man upright, or as the sacred Penman expresses it, "In the image of God made he man;" that is, his soul was the very copy, the transcript of the divine nature. He, who before, by his almighty fiat, spoke the world into being, breathed into man the breath of spiritual life, and his soul was adorned with a resemblance of the perfections of Deity. This was the finishing stroke of the creation: the perfection both of the moral and

material world. And so near did man resemble his divine Original, that God could not but rejoice and take pleasure in his own likeness. And therefore we read, that when God had finished the inanimate and brutish part of the creation, he looked upon it, and beheld it was good; but when that lovely, God-like creature man was made, behold it was very good.

Happy, unspeakably happy must man needs be, when thus a partaker of the divine nature. And thus might he have still continued, had he continued holy. But God placed him in a state of probation, with a free grant to eat of every tree in the garden of Eden, except the tree of knowledge of good and evil: the day he should eat thereof, he was surely to die; that is, not only to be subject to temporal, but spiritual death; and consequently, to lose that divine image, that spiritual life God had not long since breathed into him, and which was as much his happiness as his glory.

These, one would imagine, were easy conditions for a finite creature's happiness to depend on. But man, unhappy man, being seduced by the devil, and desiring, like him, to be equal with his Maker, did eat of the forbidden fruit; and thereby became liable to that curse, which the eternal God, who cannot lie, had denounced against his disobedience.

Accordingly we read, that soon after Adam had fallen, he complained that he was naked; naked, not only as to his body, but naked and destitute of those divine graces which, before decked and beautified his soul. The unhappy mutiny, and disorder which the visible creation fell into, the briars and thorns which now sprung up and overspread the earth, were but poor emblems, lifeless representations of that confusion and rebellion, and those divers lusts and passions which sprung up in, and quite overwhelmed the soul of man immediately after the fall. Alas! he was now no longer the image of the invisible God; but as he had

imitated the devil's sin, he became as it were a partaker of the devil's nature, and from an union with, sunk into a state of direct enmity against God.

Now in this dreadful disordered condition, are all of us brought into the world: for as the root is, such must the branches be. Accordingly we are told, "That Adam beget a son in his own likeness;" or, with the same corrupt nature which he himself had, after he had eaten the forbidden fruit. And experience as well as scripture proves, that we also are altogether born in sin and corruption; and therefore incapable, whilst in such a state, to hold communion with God. For as light cannot have communion with darkness, so God can have no communion with such polluted sons of Belial.

Here then appears the end and design why Christ was manifest in the flesh; to put an end to these disorders, and to restore us to that primitive dignity in which we were at first created. Accordingly he shed his precious blood to satisfy his Father's justice for our sins; and thereby also he procured for us the Holy Ghost, who should once more re- instamp the divine image upon our hearts, and make us capable of living with and enjoying the blessed God.

This was the great end of our Lord's coming into the world; nay, this is the only end why the world itself is now kept in being. For as soon as a sufficient number are sanctified out of it, the heavens shall be wrapped up like a scroll, the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth, and all that therein is, shall be burnt up.

This sanctification of the Spirit, is that new birth mentioned by our blessed Lord to Nicodemus, "without which we cannot see the kingdom of God." This is what St. Paul calls being "renewed in the spirit of our minds;" and it is the spring of that holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

Thus then, it is undeniably certain, we must receive the Holy Ghost ere we can be stiled true members of Christ's mystical body.

I come in the Second place to lay down some scriptural marks, whereby we may easily judge, whether we have thus received the Holy Ghost or not.

And the First I shall mention, is, our having received a spirit of prayer and supplication; for that always accompanies the spirit of grace. No sooner was Paul converted, but “behold he prayeth.” And this was urged as an argument, to convince Ananias that he was converted. And God's elect are also said to “cry to him day and night.”

And since one great work of the Holy Spirit is to convince us of sin, and to set us upon seeking pardon and renewing grace, through the all-sufficient merits of a crucified Redeemer, whosoever has felt the power of the world to come, awakening him from his spiritual lethargy, cannot but be always crying out, “Lord, what wouldst thou have me to do?” Or, in the language of the importunate blind Bartimeus, “Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy upon me.”

The blessed Jesus, as he received the Holy Ghost without measure, so he evidenced it by nothing more, than his frequent addresses at the throne of grace. Accordingly we read, that he was often alone on the mountain praying; that he rose a great while before day to pray: nay, that he spent whole nights in prayer. And whosoever is made partaker of the same Spirit which the holy Jesus, will be of the same mind, and delight in nothing so much, as to “draw nigh unto God,” and lift up holy hands and hearts in frequent and devout prayer.

It must be confessed, indeed, that this spirit of supplication is often as it were sensibly lost, and decays, for some time, even in those who have actually received the Holy Ghost. Through spiritual dryness and barrenness of soul, they find in themselves a listlessness and backwardness to this duty of prayer; but then they esteem it as their cross, and still persevere in seeking Jesus, though it be sorrowing: and their hearts, notwithstanding, are fixed upon God, though they

cannot exert their affections so strongly as usual, on account of that spiritual deadness, which God, for wise reasons, has suffered to benumb their souls.

But as for the formal believer, it is not so with him. No; he either prays not at all, or if he does enter into his closet, it is with reluctance, out of custom, or to satisfy the checks of his conscience. Whereas, the true believer can no more live without prayer, than without food day by day. And he finds his soul as really and perceptibly fed by the one, as his body is nourished and supported by the other.

A Second scripture mark of our having received the Holy Ghost, is, Not committing sin.

“Whosoever is born of God, (says St. John) sinneth not, neither can he sin, because his seed remaineth in him.” Neither can he sin. This expression does not imply the impossibility of a Christian's sinning: for we are told, that “in many things we offend all.” It only means thus much: that a man who is really born again of God, doth not willfully commit sin, much less live in the habitual practice of it. For how shall he that is dead to sin, as every converted person is, live any longer therein?

It is true, a man that is born again of God, may, through surprise, or the violence of a temptation, fall into an act of sin: witness the adultery of David, and Peter's denial of his Master. But then, like them, he quickly rises again, goes out from the world, and weeps bitterly; washes the guilt of sin away by the tears of sincere repentance, joined with faith in the blood of Jesus Christ; takes double heed to his ways for the future, and perfects holiness in the fear of God.

The meaning of this expression of the Apostle, that “a man who is born of God, cannot commit sin,” has been fitly illustrated, by the example of a covetous worldling, to the general bent of whose inclinations, liberality and profuseness are directly opposite: but if, upon some unexpected, sudden occasion, he does play the prodigal, he immediately repents him of his fault, and returns with double care to

his sin again. And so is every one that is born again: to commit sin, is as contrary to the habitual frame and tendency of his mind, as generosity is to the inclinations of a miser; but if at any time, he is drawn into sin, he immediately, with double zeal, returns to his duty, and brings forth fruits meet for repentance. Whereas, the unconverted sinner is quite dead in trespasses and sins: or if he does abstain from gross acts of it, through worldly selfish motives, yet, there is some right eye he will not pluck out; some right-hand which he will not cut off; some precious Agag that he will not sacrifice for God; and thereby he is convinced that he is but a mere Saul: and consequently, whatever pretensions he may make to the contrary, he has not yet received the Holy Ghost.

A Third mark whereby we may know, whether or not we have received the Holy Ghost, is, Our conquest over the world.

“For whosoever is born of God, (says the Apostle) overcometh the world.” By the world, we are to understand, as St. John expressed it, “all that is in the world, the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life.” And by overcoming of it, is meant, our renouncing these, so as not to follow or be led by them: for whosoever is born from above, has his affections set on things above. He feels a divine attraction in his soul, which forcibly draws his mind heavenwards; and as the hart panteth after the water-brooks, so doth it make his soul so long after the enjoyment of his God.

Not that he is so taken up with the affairs of another life, as to neglect the business of this. No; a truly spiritual man dares not stand any day idle; but then he takes care, though he laboreth for the meat which perisheth, first to secure that which endureth to everlasting life. Or, if God has exalted him above his brethren, yet, like Moses, Joseph, and Daniel, he, notwithstanding, looks upon himself as a stranger and pilgrim upon earth: having received a principle of new life, he walks by faith and not by sight; and his hopes being full of immortality, he can look on

all things here below as vanity and vexation of spirit. In short, though he is in, yet he is not of the world; and as he was made for the enjoyment of God, so nothing but God can satisfy his soul.

The ever-blessed Jesus was a perfect instance of overcoming the world. For though he went about continually doing good, and always lived as in a press and throng; yet, wherever he was, his conversation tended heavenwards. In like manner, he that is joined to the Lord in one spirit, will so order his thoughts, words, and actions, that he will evidence to all, that his conversation is in heaven.

On the contrary, an unconverted man being of the earth, is earthy; and having no spiritual eye to discern spiritual things, he is always seeking for happiness in this life, where it never was, will, or can be found. Being not born again from above, he is bowed down by a spirit of natural infirmity. The serpent's curse becomes his choice, and he eats of the dust of the earth all the days of his life.

A Fourth scripture mark of our having received the Holy Ghost, is, Our loving one another.

“We know (says St. John) we are passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren.” “And by this (says Christ himself) shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one towards another.” Love is the fulfilling of the gospel, as well as of the law: for “God is love; and whosoever dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God.”

But by this love we are not to understand a softness and tenderness of mere nature, or a love founded on worldly motives (for this a natural man may have); but a love of our brethren, proceeding from love towards God: loving all men in general, because of their relation to God; and loving good men in particular, for the grace we see in them, and because they love our Lord Jesus in sincerity.

This is Christian charity, and that new commandment which Christ gave to his disciples. New, not in its object, but in the motive and example whereon it is founded, even Jesus Christ. This is that love which the primitive Christians were so renowned for, that it became a proverb, see how these Christians love one another. And without this love, though we should give all our goods to feed the poor, and our bodies to be burnt, it would profit us nothing.

Further, this love is not confined to any particular set of men, but is impartial and catholic. A love that embraces God's image wherever it beholds it, and that delights in nothing so much as to see Christ's kingdom come.

This is the love wherewith Jesus Christ loved mankind. He loved all, even the worst of men, as appears by his weeping over the obstinately perverse; but wherever he saw the least appearance of the divine likeness, that soul he loved in particular. Thus we read, that when he heard the young man say, "All these things have I kept from my youth," that so far he loved him. And when he saw any noble instance of faith, though in a Centurion and a Syrophonecian, aliens to the commonwealth of Israel, how is he said to marvel at, to rejoice in, speak of, and commend it! So every spiritual disciple of Jesus Christ will cordially embrace all who worship God in spirit and in truth, however they may differ as to the appendages of religion, and in things not essentially necessary to salvation.

I confess, indeed, that the heart of a natural man is not thus enlarged all at once; and a person may really have received the Holy Ghost, (as Peter, no doubt, had when he was unwilling to go to Cornelius) though he be not arrived to this. But then, where a person is truly in Christ, all narrowness of spirit decreases in him daily; the partition wall of bigotry and party zeal is broken down more and more; and the nearer he comes to heaven, the more his heart is enlarged with that love, which there will make no difference between any people, nation, or language, but

we shall all, with one heart, and one voice, sing praises to him that sitteth upon the throne for ever.

But I hasten to a Fifth scripture mark, Loving our enemies.

“I say unto you, (says Jesus Christ) Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to those that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you.” And this duty of loving your enemies is so necessary, that without it, our righteousness does not exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, or even of Publicans and sinners: “For if you do good to them only, who do good to you, what do you more than others?” What do you extraordinary? “Do not even the Publicans the same?” And these precepts our Lord confirmed by his own example; when he wept over the bloody city; when he suffered himself to be led as a sheep to the slaughter; when he made that mild reply to the traitor Judas, “Judas, betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?” and more especially, when in the agonies and pangs of death, he prayed for his very murderers, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

This is a difficult duty to the natural man; but whosoever is made partaker of the promise of the Spirit, will find it practicable and easy: for if we are born again of God, we must be like him, and consequently delight to be perfect in this duty of doing good to our worst enemies in the same manner, though not in the same degree as he is perfect. He sends his rain on the evil and the good; causeth his sun to shine on the just and unjust; and more especially commended his love towards us, that whilst we were his enemies, he sent forth his Son, born of a woman, made under the law, that he might become a curse for us.

Many other marks are scattered up and down the scriptures, whereby we may know whether or not we have received the Holy Ghost: such as, “to be carnally minded, is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.” “Now the fruits of the Spirit are joy, peace, long-suffering, meekness,” with a multitude of texts to

the same purpose. But as most, if not all of them, are comprehended in the duties already laid down, I dare affirm, whosoever upon an impartial examination, can find the aforesaid marks on his soul, may be as certain, as though an angel was to tell him, that his pardon is sealed in heaven.

As for my own part, I had rather see these divine graces, and this heavenly temper stamped upon my soul, than to hear an angel from heaven saying unto me, Son, be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven thee.

These are infallible witnesses; these are Emmanuel, God with and in us; these make up that white stone, which none knoweth, saving he who hath receiveth it. These are the earnest of the heavenly inheritance in our hearts: In short, these are glory begun, and are that good thing, that better part, and which if you continue to stir up this gift of God, neither men nor devils shall ever be able to take from us.

I proceed, as was proposed, in the Third place, to make an application of the doctrine delivered, to several distinct classes of professors. And

First, I shall address myself to those who are dead in trespasses and sins. And, O how could I weep over you, as our Lord wept over Jerusalem! For, alas! how distant must you be from God? What a prodigious work have you to finish, who, instead of praying day and night, seldom or never pray at all? And, instead of being born again of God, so as not to commit sin, are so deeply sunk into the nature of devils, as to make a mock at it? Or, instead of overcoming the world, so as not to follow or be led by it, are continually making provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof. And, instead of being endued with the god-like disposition of loving all men, even your enemies, have your hearts full of hatred, malice, and revenge, and deride those who are the sincere followers of the lowly Jesus. But think you, O sinners, that God will admit such polluted wretches into his sight? Or should he admit you, do you imagine you could take any pleasure in him? No; heaven itself would be no heaven to you; the devilish dispositions which are in

your hearts, would render all the spiritual enjoyments of those blessed mansions, ineffectual to make you happy. To qualify you to be blissful partakers of that heavenly inheritance with the saints in light, there is a meetness required: to attain which, ought to be the chief business of your lives.

It is true, you, as well as the righteous, in one sense, shall see God; (for we must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ) but you must see him once, never to see him more. For as you carry about in you the devil's image, with devils you must dwell. Being of the same nature, you must share the same doom. "Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out." See that you receive the Holy Ghost, before you go hence: for otherwise, how can you escape the damnation of hell?

Secondly, let me apply myself to those who deceive themselves with false hopes of salvation. Some, through the influence of a good education, or other providential restraints, have not run into the same excess of riot with other men, and they think they have no need to receive the Holy Ghost, but flatter themselves that they are really born again.

But do you show it by bringing forth the fruits of the Spirit? Do you pray without ceasing? Do you not commit sin? Have you overcome the world? And do you love your enemies, and all mankind, in the same manner, as Jesus Christ loved them?

If these things, brethren, be in you and abound, then may you have confidence towards God; but if not, although you may be civilized, yet you are not converted. No, you are yet in your sins. The nature of the old Adam still reigneth in your souls; and unless the nature of the second Adam be grafted in its room, you can never see God.

Think not, therefore, to dress yourselves up in the ornaments of a good nature, and civil education, and say with Agag, "surely the bitterness of death is past." For God's justice, notwithstanding that, like Samuel, shall hew you to pieces. However

you may be highly esteemed in the sight of men, yet, in the sight of God, you are but like the apples of Sodom, dunghills covered over with snow, mere whited sepulchers, appearing a little beautiful without, but inwardly full of corruption and of all uncleanness: and consequently will be dismissed at the last day with a “Verily, I know you not.”

But the word of God is profitable for comfort as well as correction.

Thirdly, therefore I address myself to those who are under the drawings of the Father, and are exercised with the Spirit of bondage, and not finding the marks before mentioned, are crying out, Who shall deliver us from the body of this death?

But fear not, little flock; for notwithstanding your present infant state of grace, it shall be your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. The grace of God, through Jesus Christ, shall deliver you, and give you what you thirst after. He hath promised, he will also do it. Ye shall receive the spirit of adoption, that promise of the Father, if you faint not. Only persevere in seeking it; and determine not to be at rest in you soul, till you know and feel that you are thus born again from above, and God's Spirit witnesseth with your spirits that you are the children of God.

Fourthly and Lastly, I address myself to those who have received the Holy Ghost in all his sanctifying graces, and are almost ripe for glory.

Hail, happy saints! For your heaven is begun on earth. You have already received the first fruits of the Spirit, and are patiently waiting till that blessed change come, when your harvest shall be complete. I see and admire you, though, alas! at so great a distance from you: your life, I know, is hid with Christ in God. You have comforts, you have meat to eat, which a sinful, carnal, ridiculing world knows nothing of. Christ's yoke is not become easy to you, and his burden light. You have passed through the pangs of the new birth, and now rejoice that Christ Jesus is spiritually formed in your hearts. You know what it is to dwell in Christ, and

Christ in you. Like Jacob's ladder, although your bodies are on earth, yet your souls and hearts are in heaven: and by your faith and constant recollection, like the blessed angels, you do always behold the face of your Father which is in heaven.

I need not exhort you to press forward, for you know that in walking in the Spirit there is a great reward. Rather will I exhort you, in patience to possess your souls yet a little while, and Jesus Christ will deliver you from the burden of the flesh, and an abundant entrance shall be administered to you, into the eternal joy and uninterrupted felicity of his heavenly kingdom.

Which God of his infinite mercy grant, through Jesus Christ our Lord: To whom, with the Father, and the Holy Ghost, three Persons and one God, be ascribed all honor, power, and glory, for ever and ever.