

## **§4. Excursus on Natural Theology**

### **Lecture 2**

#### **The Self-Authenticating Witness of the Holy Spirit**

Last time we began an excursus in natural theology or arguments for the existence of God. The first topic that we wanted to undertake is the proper basicity of belief in God. This is not an argument for God's existence, rather it is the claim that you can know that God exists, have a perfectly rational belief in God, without any sort of arguments for God's existence.

Last time I shared with you something about properly basic beliefs. Beliefs which are appropriately grounded can be taken in a properly basic way. It is perfectly rational to hold these beliefs even though we may not be able to argue for the truth of these beliefs. Important examples would include things like the belief in the reality of the external world or belief in the reality of the past. These are sorts of things that you can't prove on the basis of argument and evidence but you are perfectly rational to hold in a properly basic way as rooted in your experience.

What I argued then was that belief in the biblical God is appropriately grounded so that belief in God can be taken in a properly basic way. I want to look first at the role of the Holy Spirit in believing in a properly basic way in God's existence and in the great truths of the Gospel.

I would argue that fundamentally the way in which we know that God exists and that Christianity is true is by the self-authenticating witness of God's Holy Spirit. Now what do I mean by the self-authenticating witness of God's Holy Spirit? Let me mention six points by way of explanation.

1. *The experience of the Holy Spirit is veridical and unmistakable for him who has it.*

That is to say, if you are a person who genuinely is experiencing the inner witness of the Holy Spirit you can't mistake that for something else and think that it is just another god or some sort of fraudulent experience. You cannot mistake it. It is a veridical experience – that is to say, a genuine authentic experience of God himself.

But this doesn't mean it is irresistible or indubitable. I think it is unmistakable and veridical for the person who has it, but nevertheless through sin we can quench the Holy Spirit in our lives. We can resist the Holy Spirit. This experience is not necessarily an irresistible or indubitable experience for him who has it.

2. *A person who enjoys the witness of the Holy Spirit does not need supplementary arguments or evidence in order to know (and know with confidence) that he is in fact experiencing the Spirit of God.*

*3. Such an experience does not function in this case as a premise in an argument from religious experience to God, but rather it is just the immediate experience of God himself.*

It is important to understand that the self-authenticating witness of the Holy Spirit is not an argument for Christianity from religious experience. It is not saying, “We have these religious experiences; the best explanation of these is that they are genuine and veridical and therefore Christianity is true.” It is not an argument. Rather, just as you have the immediate experience of the external world or the reality of the past, so for the person who is experiencing the inner witness of God’s Spirit, he grasps in an immediate way God’s presence and isn’t arguing for God’s presence on the basis of religious experience.<sup>1</sup>

*4. In certain contexts the experience of the Holy Spirit will imply the apprehension of certain truths of the Christian religion, such as “God exists,” or in the case of an unbeliever, “I am condemned by God” when he is under the conviction of sin, or “I am reconciled to God” when someone is born again and comes to know Christ, or “Christ lives in me.” These are the sorts of truths which one apprehends through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit.*

*5. Such an experience provides one not only with a subjective assurance of Christianity’s truth, but with objective knowledge of that truth.*

I am not saying that the witness of the Holy Spirit just gives you a touchy-feely assurance that Christianity is true, a feel-good experience. Rather, I am saying that through the witness of the Holy Spirit you come to have an objective knowledge that God exists, that you are reconciled to God through Christ, things of that sort. We are not talking here about fuzzy warm experiences. We are talking about objective knowledge.

*6. Arguments and evidence incompatible with that truth are overwhelmed by the experience of the Holy Spirit for him who attends fully to it.*

A person who is experiencing the witness of the Holy Spirit may confront unbelievers or skeptics who offer arguments and evidence against Christianity which he cannot answer. He may not be in a position to answer these objections to his faith. But what I am suggesting is that for someone who fully attends to the witness of the Spirit, who doesn’t quench the Spirit, who doesn’t live in sin, for one who attends fully to the Spirit, the witness of God’s Spirit will simply provide such warrant for the truth of Christianity that it will overwhelm the arguments and evidence that are brought against it. It doesn’t answer the arguments and evidence, but it just overwhelms them and makes the truth of the Christian faith more evident than its falsity. Think for example if you were confronted with some Buddhist who tries to convince you that the external world does not exist and that this is all illusory. Any argument that he would offer for that conclusion would be based on premises which are less obvious and less certain than just your properly basic

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<sup>1</sup> 4:57

belief that there is an external world. So those alleged defeaters are simply overwhelmed by the warrant that you already have in a properly basic way for the belief in the external world. My contention is that something similar is the case with the witness of the Holy Spirit, at least for those who are in a situation like this.

## START DISCUSSION

*Student:* Could you repeat number 3 and 4?

*Dr. Craig:* Number 3 was that the witness of the Holy Spirit doesn't function as a premise in an argument from religious experience. There are arguments for God from religious experience. People will say, *Look at the worldwide religious experience that people have in so many faiths. This has got to have a cause. There must be a transcendent reality that is the source of this religious experience.* This isn't like that. This is not a premise in an argument from religious experience. Rather it is the immediate experiencing of God himself. Again, think of the analogy. You don't want to give an argument for the reality of the external world. Any argument would be bound to fail because it would be based upon evidence that comes from the external world. You simply have it as a properly basic belief. I would say that is also the case with the witness of the Holy Spirit.

Number 4 was that in certain contexts the experience of the Holy Spirit will imply the apprehension of certain truths of the Christian religion. For example, imagine a non-believer who is an agnostic, but confronted with the beauty and the grandeur of nature he has the conviction that all of this has been made by God. That implies the truth that God exists. In grasping that, he grasps the truth of that proposition that God exists.<sup>2</sup> Or, again, imagine someone who has been born again and comes to know Christ. He has the witness of the Holy Spirit in his heart that he is a child of God, and that implies truths like *I am reconciled to God*. So through the witness of the Holy Spirit we come to apprehend certain truths of the Christian religion, not just have a fuzzy experience. We grasp truths. That was the point.

Number 3 was that such an experience doesn't function in this case as a premise in any argument from religious experience, but rather just is the immediate experiencing of God.

*Student:* How does a Christian best respond to a non-Christian who claims to have this same properly basic belief about something that is, in fact, false. I am thinking of the Mormons claiming to have the burning in the bosom.

*Dr. Craig:* Exactly. We will address that question later on when we consider objections. Right now I am simply trying to lay the view out, but this will be an important objection – the Mormon who comes to you and has no good reason for why he believes in the

doctrine of the Latter Day Saints except, he says, I have this burning in the bosom that tells me this is true. We'll address that later.

## END DISCUSSION

It seems to me that the New Testament teaches this view that I've just laid out. It teaches it with respect to both the believer and unbeliever alike. Now at first blush it might appear to you that it is somewhat circular to appeal to scriptural prooftexts to prove the witness of the Holy Spirit, as if to say that we believe in the witness of the Holy Spirit because the Scripture says that there is such a witness of the Holy Spirit. But insofar as ours is an "in-house" discussion among Christian believers who do accept the authority of Scripture, it is perfectly legitimate for us to lay out what Scripture teaches about religious epistemology, that is to say about the theory of knowledge with regard to religious truths. If you were interacting with an unbeliever, you obviously would not appeal to Scripture. You would simply report to him that you do have an inner witness of the Holy Spirit which vouchsafes to you the great truths of the Christian religion – including that God exists.

Let's open our Scriptures and look first at the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. According to Galatians 3:26 and 4:6, when a person becomes a Christian, he automatically becomes an adopted son of God and is indwelt with the Holy Spirit. Paul says, "for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. . . . And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" Paul makes this very same point in Romans 8:15-16. Paul explains that it is the witness of the Holy Spirit with our spirit that allows us to know that we are God's children. He says, "for you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." Paul says that through the witness of the Holy Spirit we can know that we are God's children. That obviously entails, for example, that God exists.

Paul uses elsewhere the Greek word *plerophoria* (which means "complete confidence; complete assurance") in order to indicate that the believer has knowledge as a result of the Spirit's work. For example, he uses this word in Colossians 2:2 and in 1 Thessalonians 1:5 to indicate the confident assurance that one has by the witness of the Holy Spirit that one is a child of God.<sup>3</sup> In popular Christian piety this is usually called "assurance of salvation." People will ask you "Do you have assurance of your salvation? Do you know that you are saved? That you are going to heaven if you die?" Obviously the assurance of salvation (if you have it) entails certain truths such as "God forgives my

sin,” “Christ has reconciled me to God,” “I am a child of God,” and so forth, so that by having assurance of salvation one has assurance of these truths.

Not only the apostle Paul, but also the apostle John makes it quite clear that it is the Holy Spirit living within us that gives believers conviction of the fundamental truth of Christianity. Look at 1 John 2:20, 27. There John says,

But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all know . . . the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that any one should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him.

Here John says that it is the Holy Spirit who teaches the believer the truth of divine things. In saying this, John is clearly echoing the teachings of Jesus himself as John records them in the Gospel of John. For example, in John 14:26 Jesus says, “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” Now the truth that the Holy Spirit teaches us is not, I’m convinced, the fine points of Christian doctrine. There are too many Spirit-filled Christian people who disagree doctrinally in order for that to be the case. Rather, I think what John is talking about is that inner assurance that the Holy Spirit gives of the basic truths of the Christian faith, what Alvin Plantinga calls the great things of the Gospel – the great truths of the Gospel. This assurance does not come from human arguments but comes directly from God himself.

Now someone might disagree with this by pointing to 1 John 4:1-3. It might be thought to indicate that the testimony of the Holy Spirit is not self-authenticating, but that you need to test it. John says,

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist of which that you have heard that is coming and now it is in the world already.

I think to interpret this passage as saying that we ought to test or doubt the inner witness of the Holy Spirit is a misinterpretation of the passage. John is not talking to people about testing the inner witness of the Holy Spirit which they enjoy. Rather he is talking about testing people who come to you claiming to be speaking by the Holy Spirit. He points out there are many false prophets that have gone out into the world, therefore you have got to be careful. You have to test the spirits. He referred to these same people earlier in 1 John 2:18-19:

Children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come; therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us for if they had been of us they would have continued with us. But they went out that it might be plain that they are all not of us.<sup>4</sup>

John is not encouraging the believer to doubt the witness of the Holy Spirit in his own heart; rather he says that if somebody comes to you claiming to be speaking by the Holy Spirit, then, since that situation is external to yourself and involves additional truth claims that are not immediately apprehended by you, you must test that person to make sure that his claim is true because there are many deceivers and false prophets claiming to speak by the Spirit. But in our own lives, as we've already seen, John says you've been anointed by the Holy Spirit. You don't have any need for anyone to teach you because the witness of the Spirit is sufficient to assure us of those truths to which he testifies.

John also underlines other teachings of Jesus about the work of the Holy Spirit found in the Gospel of John. For example, in John 14:16-17, 20, Jesus says it is the indwelling Holy Spirit who will give the believer the certainty of knowing that Jesus lives in him and that he is in Jesus, in the sense of being united with Jesus. Jesus says,

And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you. . . . In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

John echoes this same teaching in 1 John 3:24, 4:13. John says, "All who keep his commandments abide in him and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us. . . . By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit." John uses his characteristic phrase "by this we know" to emphasize that as Christians we have a confident knowledge that our faith is true, that we really do abide in God, and God really does abide in us. In fact John goes so far as to contrast the confidence which the witness of the Spirit gives to the evidence of human testimony. 1 John 5:6-10 John writes,

This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the witness, because the Spirit is the truth. There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree. If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has borne witness to his Son. He who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. He who does not believe

God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne to his Son.

In this passage, the “water” probably refers to Jesus’ baptism, and the “blood” to the cross – the crucifixion. These are the bookends of Jesus’ earthly ministry. They mark the beginning and the end of his ministry. When John speaks of “the testimony of men” (in verse 9 when he says, “if we receive the testimony of men”) he is talking about nothing less than the apostolic testimony to the events of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. In his Gospel, for example in the Gospel of John 21:24, he emphasizes the importance of the apostolic testimony to these events.<sup>5</sup> He says, “These things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and believing have life through his name” Yet here he says that even though we quite rightly receive the testimony of men (the apostolic testimony to the historical Jesus) nevertheless the inner testimony of the Spirit is even greater than the apostolic testimony! As Christians we have the testimony of God living within us, the indwelling Holy Spirit who bears witness to our spirit that we are children of God.

So, although evidence and arguments might be used to support the believer’s faith or to confirm the believer’s faith, they are not properly the basis of that faith. For the believer, God is not just the conclusion of a syllogism; he is the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob living within us. How then does the believer know that Christianity is true? Fundamentally, he knows because of the self-authenticating witness of God’s Holy Spirit living within him.

## START DISCUSSION

*Student:* So far it sounds as though this is a defensive form of apologetic, but I’ve heard it used in an offensive way. I was curious if we could use this in an offensive way. For example, you mentioned earlier about a person looking at a beautiful sunset and inferring that God exists. Should we not use this in an offensive way as I’ve seen online and atheists hate it when you do that.

*Dr. Craig:* I guess that depends what you mean by offensive and defensive. Certainly we can see how this could be defensive in that you would say to the non-Christian, *You haven’t been able to invalidate or disprove my Christian belief which I hold in a properly basic way.* But on the other hand, I think we can be candid with non-believers in what you might call in an offensive way. That is to say, if they say, *How do you know that Christianity is true?* I think we can say, *I know because of the self-authenticating witness of God’s Spirit who lives within me, and he gives me a fundamental knowledge and assurance that it is true.* I think that we should be candid and open with the unbeliever about this. Then what you can do is to say, *Now to show you that it is true, let me give*



*you some arguments and evidence.* Then you can provide those as well. I like to distinguish between knowing our faith to be true and showing our faith to be true. The fundamental way in which we *know* our faith to be true is through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. The way we *show* it to someone else to be true is by providing arguments and evidence. But I think that we should be unapologetic about the way in which we know our faith is true in a properly basic way.

*Student:* Some people distinguish salvation and sanctification as a separate thing. But Michael Youssef said there is no salvation without sanctification because it is of the working of the same Spirit. A lot of people kind of say, *Confess and believe that Jesus is Lord and you are saved* and yet does not work sanctification. That is kind of contrary to what all the Spirit is . . .

*Dr. Craig:* Our time is brief so let me just respond very quickly. We will talk more about the difference between justification and sanctification when we get to the part in the class on doctrine of salvation. But I would say it is patently clear from the New Testament that there are people who are justified, they are saved, they are born again in Christ, but they are not living very sanctified lives. I am thinking of the Corinthian church. The Corinthian church to which Paul wrote was filled with immorality, with wrong practices, people getting drunk at the communion table, divisiveness, factiousness, and yet Paul treats them as Christians. He says *You are believers but you are still living under the power of the flesh.* So I would disagree with those who say there is no such thing as a carnal Christian; that is to say, someone who is born again and saved but he isn't living in full obedience and power of the Holy Spirit.

## **END DISCUSSION**

With that we will close. Next week we will look at the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the unbeliever. Since the unbeliever is not indwelt with the Holy Spirit, does that mean that he at least has got to rely upon arguments and evidence in order to know Christianity is true? That is the question we will look at next time.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Total Running Time: 30:54 (Copyright © 2015 William Lane Craig)