

Discrediting the Witnesses

by Daniel Steele

Daniel Steele's sermon critiques the validity of early Methodist testimonies while emphasizing the importance of personal spiritual experiences, regardless of educational background.

Scripture: Matthew 18:3

Topics: "Spiritual Humility", "Personal Testimony"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches about the importance of seeking spiritual truth and experiences from humble and unlearned individuals, rather than relying solely on the wisdom of the educated and noble. He highlights how John Wesley, despite his academic background, valued the testimonies of simple believers and sought spiritual insights from those considered lowly by society. Steele emphasizes the significance of personal experiences of God's salvation, sanctification, and inner purity, regardless of one's educational status, using examples of illiterate individuals like Amanda Smith who testified to their spiritual encounters. He encourages a humble and childlike approach to understanding spiritual truths, similar to how Lord Bacon revolutionized scientific inquiry by asking simple questions and observing nature.

Transcript

THE author thus kindly apologizes for Wesley's great doctrinal error of Christian perfection in this life as consciously received. He says: "They," that is, Wesley and his colaborers, "were surrounded by a mass of very ignorant followers, whose crude, unreliable, indiscriminating testimonies on the subject they felt bound to accept in lieu of anything better, and to whose rudimentary comprehension they felt bound to adapt their teaching." This is very charitable indeed. But let us name the authors of some of these "undiscriminating testimonies:" William Bramwell, Joseph Benson, Francis Asbury, Hester Ann Rogers, John Fletcher, Mary Fletcher, Thomas Walsh, "whose portrait," says Abel Stevens, "was a facsimile of Jonathan Edwards, whom he much resembled in other respects." There were also associated with Wesley after he fell into the great doctrinal error such men as Thomas Coke and Adam Clarke, who were ensnared by the same delusion and promoted it by their preaching. Charles Wesley, though differing from his brother in some minor particulars, helped this doctrine greatly by his glorious hymns, such as:

Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit

Into every troubled breast!

Let us all in thee inherit,

Let us find that second rest.

'Tis done! Thou dost this moment save,

With full salvation bless;

Redemption through thy blood I have,

And spotless love and peace.

The testimony to the witness of the Spirit to entire sanctification is regarded by our author as "of very little value indeed," because "they never define the terms they use in such a way that we can be sure we know precisely what they are talking about. They use the language of the class meeting and the pulpit." Then follows a description of this language not very complimentary to the pulpit, as "exceedingly ambiguous, being wholly of the indefinite, popular sort." The amount of this objection is that the testimony of Christian people is to be rejected because they do not bring their dictionaries to the love feast and class meeting, and speak in the philosophic style of a lecturer on psychology! A third rate lawyer, by cross questioning, can manage to get an intelligible testimony from a witness in the court of a justice of the peace where five dollars is the value in dispute, while a Methodist doctor of divinity, with the opportunity to cross question by the hour in private, is powerless in his effort to arrive at a spiritual fact of blessed significance.

Those who reject our doctrine of the Spirit's witness to adoption could make exactly the same objection. How would our author meet it? These are the names of some of these discredited witnesses -- John Fletcher, Stephen Olin, Wilbur Fisk, and Frances E. Willard.

Here it is wise to raise the question whether there are not facts on which illiterate people are just as competent to testify as the most learned, such as facts apprehended by the five senses. Any jury would receive the statement of what a man saw, heard, handled, tasted, smelt, although he could neither read nor write. It is just so in respect to intuitive knowledge, what a man is conscious of within his own mind. He hears the Gospel and says that he has a sense of guilt; he believes on Christ and testifies to a sense of forgiveness. Is he not just as competent to testify to these conscious experiences as any professor of psychology in any university? But suppose that our converted illiterate after a time testifies to a sense of inward impurity which gives her distress, and after hearing that there is deliverance from this, as there was from her guilt, she by faith claims inward cleansing, is not Amanda Smith at her washtub just as competent to attest this sense of inward whiteness, whiter than snow, as she was to testify to the pardon of sin? If she persists in this testimony thirty or forty years, and her outer life is as white as she says her heart is, she is by no means to be ruled out of court because she has not a university diploma in her trunk.

What we have felt and seen

With confidence we tell,

And publish to the sons of men

The signs infallible.

One of the marks of greatness in John Wesley, M. A., fellow of Lincoln College and lecturer in Oxford University, was that he was willing to sit at the feet of unlearned and obscure men who had been taught of God the deep things of Christian experience, that he was willing to journey, part of the way on foot, to

Herrnhuth, and, listen to four sermons of Christian David, a carpenter, who was twenty years old before he had even seen a Bible, being a zealous papist who, before his conversion, had crawled on his knees before images, performed penances, and invoked departed saints. Why did the Oxford graduate seek the instruction of the unlettered Bush Preacher, as persecuting priests and Jesuits sneeringly called him? Because Wesley believed that there are things of the greatest value " hidden from the wise and prudent, but revealed unto babes." He was willing to become a babe that he might get this revelation. Lord Bacon opened the gate to the procession of all the modern sciences when he taught, men to throw to the winds their proud Grecian theories about Nature, and to humble themselves as little children and ask the simplest questions of Nature, and thus get at a series of facts leading up to great principles by induction.

Wesley was a spiritual Bacon, asking questions of spiritual men and women, however humble, in order that he might find the gate of a spiritual religion and lead millions in all lands, and in all future generations, through it with joyful praises and glad hallelujahs. He found it -- praise the Lord! Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth before it utters one word depreciatory of this great spiritual instaurator, because, passing by the wise men after the flesh, the mighty, and the noble, who could not help him in his search after spiritual truth, he descended to men of low estate, rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom. Here he found hosts of witnesses of the experience of God's uttermost salvation. I honor him for his Baconian method of research, questioning and cross-questioning and spending much time in examining witnesses one by one, then deliberately summing up the results thus: "The testimony of some I could not receive; but concerning the far greater part it is plain (unless they could be supposed to tell willful and deliberate lies), 1. That they feel no inward sin, and, to the best of their knowledge, commit no outward sin ; 2. That they see and love God every moment, and pray, rejoice, give thanks, evermore; 3. That they have constantly as clear a witness from God of sanctification as they have of justification."

The same characteristic distinguished Dr. Channing. He was deeply interested in the study of spiritual phenomena in the experiences of uneducated men and women remote from the influence of Christian culture and sectarian theories of salvation. He often attended the Sunday night social meeting in the Bethel of Father E. T. Taylor in Boston. He was eager to hear the personal religious experience of illiterate men, sailors of all nationalities, longshoremen, coal heavers, and wharf men and their wives, who had been converted in the Mariners' Bethel. He said he cared not to hear the echoes, those who repeated hackneyed phrases, but he was desirous of hearing the voices of original testimony, "everyone in his own tongue speaking forth the wonderful works of God." He inquired their names, sought an introduction to them, invited them to his study, and sometimes sent his carriage for them. He was in the habit of questioning them closely by the hour respecting their previous religious knowledge, creed, and theory; to find out how much of their experience could be ascribed to human influences, and how much must be regarded as the work of the Holy Spirit. This was done not in the spirit of skepticism, but of earnest desire to arrive at the truth. Both Wesley and Channing were wise in their selection of the best field for their investigation. They both showed true greatness in their high appreciation of humanity in its low estate, without the glitter of wealth and culture.

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