

THE TEACHING SPIRIT

by Ray C. Stedman

Our last time together in this letter was to see what John had to say about the tremendous adequacy of the Word of God to bring us, if we submit to it, to the full experience of vital, fruitful living. It never fails to thrill me that Christianity is not trying to produce religious plaster saints, but thoroughly human individuals who operate as God intended them to operate. The whole thrust of the Christian message is to the end that we experience life as God intended life to be. And the instrument that will do this is the Word of God. It is designed to that end.

But someone says, "This is where I have problems. I know the Bible is important. I know it is designed to produce in me what God desires. But my problem is, I have such difficulty understanding the Bible. I find there are a great many different interpretations of various passages, and there are so many contingencies upon which Scripture seems to rest, and so few areas of universal agreement, that I have great difficulty with the Bible." Well, the only answer to that is to see the full position the apostle takes here, the full thought of John on this matter. He goes on in this passage to say that we have more than the Word of God. There is not only the outward testimony of the Word, but there is also an inner witness.

I am afraid very little is said in Christian churches today about the great theme of the witness, the anointing, the testimonium, of the Spirit of God. Yet it is one of the most vital themes of Scripture, for it explains what makes the difference between Bible study that is dull, dead, lifeless, and ineffective, and Bible study that is live, vital, compelling, and fruitful. Look at these verses with me now.

I write this to you about those who would deceive you; but 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. {1 Jn 2:26-27 RSV}

Notice that he introduces this theme by announcing the presence and purpose of an inner witness. "I write this to you about those who would deceive you," he says, "for you have an anointing which you have received from him, which abides in you." In other words, this anointing is especially designed to meet the problem of uncertainty in the face of the many deceitful and deceptive concepts that are around us. How do you know what is the truth? How do you know which interpretation is right about a passage in the Word? "Well," John says, "you have an anointing which abides in you for that very purpose." This does not mean, of course, that Christians can never go astray, because they do. But it does mean that, when they go astray, they do so either because they have been ignorant of the anointing, or are resistant to the teaching of the Holy Spirit within. And if they do go astray, they can only go so far, for this anointing, John says, abides in you.

Now we have already seen that this anointing is the Holy Spirit himself, whom you received when you believed in Jesus Christ; both the Word of God and the Spirit of God are received at conversion. We receive the Word of God from those who brought it to us, and we receive the Spirit of God from the Lord Jesus when, in response to the Word of God, we receive Christ into our life. All of you who are Christians have had this experience, and, therefore, you have both "the word which you heard from the beginning," as John calls it, and "the anointing which abides in you."

With regard to the Word, we are told to *let* the Word of God abide in us, i.e., let it possess you, let it take over in your life, dwell in your heart and grip you. This requires a continual coming to the Word. But

with regard to the Spirit, John says, he abides; he is there already if you have received Christ. There is no need to ask him for more of him to come in, as many people are misled to believe today. He is all there! He is a person, and a person comes in as a unit.

When I came into this room, I did not send my legs in first, and then my head. I came in altogether. That is the way a person comes in. When the Holy Spirit comes into a Christian's life he comes in altogether, as a unit. He is all there, and he abides there. But it is necessary, as we will see from this passage, to abide in him. That is the important aspect. Now the apostle goes on to announce not only the presence of this inner witness, but also to suggest the function and the fullness of his witness to us:

...you have no need that any one should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie. {1 Jn 2:26b RSV}

What strange words: "You have no need that any one teach you," i.e., you have no need for human teachers. Well, then, what am I doing up here? This seems, at first glance, to contradict other passages of Scripture. We know there are teachers, provided by the Holy Spirit. There is a gift of teaching. There are pastor-teachers set forth by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ, to teach men the truth. Even the apostles were teachers. John was a human teacher, Paul was a human teacher, Peter, James, and the other writers of Scripture were all human teachers. How then could John say, "you do not have any need of a human teacher?" The explanation lies in the level at which this kind of teaching takes place.

Let me try to explain: You know that, in literature, it is common to use the eye and the ear as metaphors for an inner comprehension of the mind. There are actually three levels of seeing and hearing possible to a human being. First, the eyes and the ears are physical organs designed to see and to hear. Now as physical organs they sometimes malfunction and we have to provide help for them, as glasses (or if you are really up to date, contact lenses) for the eyes, or hearing aids for the ears. We all are familiar with these functions of the physical organs.

But the soul has organs of sight and of hearing as well. Even in secular literature you find this referred to. We speak of seeing something, by which we mean that "we have understood it," or grasped it, intellectually. Or we hear something, by which we mean that "we have heeded it, we have responded to it." Thus we have heard with the mind and the emotions, the soul. We may sense something is wrong about a thing we hear. We don't know quite what it is, but we know it is there, and we say, "It doesn't sound right to me." We do not mean that there is something wrong with the decibels reaching our ears, we mean there is something wrong with the logic of it. You experience this negatively when you hear or read a foreign language you have never learned. You hear the words or you can see the letters, but you do not know what they mean. You see them, but you do not see them.

Perhaps you have experienced this when, as a stranger, you have unwittingly come into a family crisis. You carry on a conversation, but you sense there is something else going on that you are not fully aware of. Certain words are said with hidden meanings, and you become aware you are involved in a situation that you do not understand. You hear but you do not hear. All this is on the level of the mind and the emotions, but there are also organs of the spirit, and this is what John refers to here. There are eyes and ears of the spirit by which we may gain certain flashes of insight and thus come to a full understanding of a truth in relationship to other truths. We see the whole thing clearly without the necessity of reasoning it all out. These are the eyes and ears of the spirit.

If you want to see that in the Scriptures, turn to Matthew 13 where our Lord is giving the parables of the kingdom. In Verse 13, he says to the disciples, "This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand," {Matt 13:13 RSV}. Do you see the three levels there? Seeing (with their physical eyes) they do not see (with their mental eyes), and

hearing (with their physical ears) they do not hear (with their mental ears), nor do they understand (i.e., it does not reach the level of the spirit where they grasp the full meaning of the truth in relationship to themselves and the world around them). In Verse 16 he says to his disciples, "But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear," {Matt 13:16 RSV}. But he does not go on to say, "Blessed are you, for you understand," for they did not understand. As they listened to these parables they did not know what he meant any more than many of you know what he meant by them. They did not grasp them. They had not yet received the Holy Spirit and they did not understand his full meaning although they knew, intellectually, what he was talking about. The crowd did not even get that far: They heard the words, but let them flow right on through, and that was all there was to it. The disciples had gone a step further but they did not fully understand. In Paul's great letter to the church at Ephesus, he prays for his readers concerning this very thing. In Chapter 1 he says,

I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power... {Eph 1:16-19a RSV}

It requires the operation of the Holy Spirit, to understand, to grasp the immensity of these tremendous things, to be thrilled and gripped with the excitement of what God has set before us. This then is why we do not have any need of human teachers. At this level, only God can do this. Only the Spirit of God can touch the human spirit and give insight to it. That is why at this level no human being can help you, although the Holy Spirit will often base his teaching upon the word which the human teacher brings.

You have a clear example of that in Matthew 16, when our Lord asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" {Matt 16:13b RSV}. They named various ones, and then he said, "But who do you say that I am?" {Matt 16:15b RSV}. Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," {Matt 16:16b RSV}. Now, Peter had been observing the Lord, but he was puzzled by him, as all these disciples were. They could never figure him out. They did not understand why he did what he did, and said what he said. They were drawn to him, but they were continually amazed at him, and puzzled by him, Peter along with all the rest. But when Jesus asked that question, "Who do you say that I am?" suddenly it all came clear to Peter. He saw it in a flash, in a sudden grasp of truth, and he said, "Why, you're the Christ, the Son of the living God!" The Lord Jesus said to him, "Peter, blessed are you! [Because God had done something for him.] You didn't learn that by flesh and blood. You didn't reason that out, you didn't amass all the evidence and come to a reasonable conclusion as to what I am -- but my Father has revealed it to you," {cf, Matt 16:17}. That is the anointing, the teaching of the Spirit. There are three very clear instances of this in Luke 24:

After the resurrection, when our Lord joined the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, he found them troubled and disturbed. He said to them, "'O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them [or he opened to them] in all the scriptures the things concerning himself," {Luke 24:25-27 RSV}. They had not seen these truths before. They had read these Scriptures many times, but they had never seen that they referred to the Messiah, to the Christ. They still did not know who this stranger was, but now they knew that the Scriptures described a suffering Messiah.

Then in Verse 32, after he had revealed himself to them, and disappeared, "They said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?'" {Luke 24:32 RSV}. They had heard what he was saying, but they did not grasp it until he opened their eyes -- the eyes of their hearts -- and the minute he did, their hearts began to burn. They

were captivated by what they saw, caught up by it, entranced by these magnificent truths. That is what the anointing does. The Spirit of God takes the Word of God and opens it to us. Look at it again in Verse 44 of this same chapter. Again our Lord appears to the disciples, and says to them, "These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled," {Luke 24:44 RSV}. They had heard these many times, but "then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures," {Luke 24:45 RSV}.

Now, I think we can see what this is, this anointing of which John speaks. It is an illumination of the mind and the heart, and a deep persuasion from the Holy Spirit. It involves intense powers of persuasion, it is a compelling thing, but it is not an impartation of knowledge. It is not a case of the Holy Spirit giving information which is not recorded in the Bible; it is a taking of the Scriptures and confirming them. It is a witness, confirming a fact. An exterior fact, with an interior confirmation or witness.

In the book of Acts, as Paul is on his way to Jerusalem, he said to the people on his last journey, "The Holy Spirit everywhere witnesses that bonds and afflictions are awaiting me when I get to Jerusalem," {cf, Acts 20:23}. Was this some special secret information that the Spirit of God was giving him? No, as they spoke of the possibility of this, the Spirit bore witness within him that what they said was true. It had the ring of truth, there was an inner confirmation that this was what was awaiting him, as it surely proved to be.

Perhaps you have often had the experience of reading a passage of Scripture a hundred times, having studied it, and perhaps even taught it, but the 101st time it suddenly comes alive with a wealth of meaning that you never saw before, and it simply glows with significance. That is the teaching of the Spirit. This is why the Bible never becomes a dead book. You can finish one book, turn around and start back at the beginning and go through it again, and it is as though you have never read it before. I do not think I have ever preached a series of sermons on a book of the Bible but that, when I had finished it, I did not want to start back at the beginning and go through again. I had learned so much, and I knew I would learn that much more going through it again. That is the marvelous ministry of the Holy Spirit to teach us.

A young couple sat in my study a few days ago, telling me, with obvious joy and enthusiasm on their faces, how they had known for years the intellectual truth that Christians need not be discouraged in their work for God, because they were working with One who was adequate to meet every problem and supply every demand. But, they said, this last weekend this truth had suddenly broken upon them in a new way. They grasped it, it came alive to them, and they saw the implications of it, that they need never go on in the dullness of discouragement such as they had been doing, but the moment they relied upon the working of the Spirit of God the battle was already won. They were alight and aflame with the enthusiasm of that truth. That is the teaching of the Spirit.

Now it is not limited to Christians. All men can experience this, and, perhaps, have at times. I rather think all the great discoveries of science have come about through this. Men can hear a chance remark, and it may not seem significant in the context of the conversation they are holding, but a word from another person may strike a fire in an individual heart to give him a key to the clear grasp of a situation. That is the Spirit of God at work in men. But for the understanding of divine truth, especially that which concerns man's relationship to God, only the believer can enter into this realm. This anointing abides in the believer, i.e., it is always ready to work.

Notice what John says about the scope of the teaching. "His anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie." As I said in an earlier message, that does not mean that a Christian is a know-it-all. There is nothing more abrasive, more difficult, than a know-it-all. But it means that there is no subject of

human knowledge that is excluded from this experience of the teaching of the Holy Spirit. But, because it is primarily centered in the believer, upon the most central subject of all -- the relation of us, as men, to God, as God -- it therefore touches everything in your life. Read what Paul has to say in the second chapter of First Corinthians about this. There is a wisdom, he says, which is imparted to you which concerns "the deep things of God," {1 Cor 2:10 KJV}. Think on that phrase, "the deep things of God!" These amazing themes, these profundities of life, these mysteries of life hidden in Christ, are revealed as the Spirit teaches you from the Word, so that you grasp the basic issues of living and grow in grace. You learn that, at the heart of creation, of all human significance, is planted the cross, the resurrection, and the enthronement of Jesus Christ. Now, he ends with this admonition to us that reveals both the narrowness and the necessity of this witness of the Spirit.

...just as it has taught you, abide in him. {1 Jn 2:27b RSV}

The emphasis here is on those words, "as he has taught you." What the Spirit has taught you, not that he has taught the other fellow. Remember, after the resurrection, Jesus said to Peter, "Feed my sheep," {John 21:15-17 KJV}. And Peter turned and looked at John and said, "Lord, what do you want this man to do?" {cf, John 21:21}. Do you remember what Jesus said? "That is none of your business. You follow me. What I teach this man to do is for him to know. What I have said for you to do, that is for you to do," {cf, John 21:22}. This is what John is saying here -- what it (the anointing) has taught you.

This is an intensely personal thing. It is to be the ground of your actions: what you have learned from the word of the Spirit, through the intermediacy of human teachers. But your activity must always be based on the conviction of what has come home to you. In other words, you walk by faith in the Word of God, as God has taught it to you. Not what you have learned by tradition. Tradition has, traditionally, been one of the most deadly foes of the church and has held people back from advancement in their spiritual life. Or not what you have learned through some church hierarchy.

Anytime you condition men to take their truth secondhand through some other individual, some line of men standing in succession above them, you have conditioned them to respond immediately to falsehood as well if it starts from the top. That is why hierarchies go astray so quickly and so easily. No, in the Christian life, all truth is intensely personal and comes directly to you from the Holy Spirit. Is that not wonderful?

That means you do not need to have a scholar interpreting the Word of God for you. You are not dependent on scholars. You can be grateful for them, you can read their very helpful comments, and the Lord will use them to teach you something, but you are not dependent upon them. You have no need that any man teach you at that level, for the Holy Spirit can instruct you. We must be open, of course, to hear all that others have to say. Charles Spurgeon once said, "I do not understand those men who have such a high opinion of what the Holy Spirit says to them, and such a low opinion of what he says to anyone else." We must remember that the Spirit of God does speak through other men, as well as through us. But, finally, we must act only on what the Lord has said to us. That is what made it possible for Martin Luther to stand before the Roman Emperor, with all the assembled dignitaries of state and church arrayed in opposition to him, one lone man, and to say, "Here I stand! I can do no other, God help me." He was listening to the voice of the Spirit to him.

Now this obedience is absolutely necessary because it is only on this basis that you can "abide in him," and that is where fruitfulness comes from. You cannot go another's route, you cannot live another's spiritual life for him, or force him to go your route either. You are to open the Word, pour over it, listen to the Holy Spirit in it, listen to others as the Holy Spirit has taught them, and then, faced with this entire array of external testimony, obey that which the Spirit confirms to your heart is the truth. John says

when you do that, you will abide in him.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this amazing phenomenon of a teaching Spirit within us. We cannot get over the joy and the thrill, the awe that grips our spirit, when we think of this mighty teacher, the Spirit of God himself, the One who knows the mind of Christ, indwelling us and willing to teach us, step by step, as we go along. Make us willing to hear, having eyes to see and ears to hear. Let it penetrate to that depth of spirit by which we shall understand and grasp these amazing riches in Christ Jesus, for we ask in his name, Amen.

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