

Convicting Power of the Holy Spirit

by Andrew Bonar

"And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:8).

(Notes of an address given by Andrew Bonar at the Perth Convention of 1883 - Perth, Scotland.)

Shall we not honor and bless and adore the Holy Spirit? Surely it might well be expected that our love, our adoring and grateful love, should go forth to Him to whom we owe so much; for every soul that has found the Savior was brought to him by the Holy Spirit. Not one sinner, from Abel down to our day, accepted the atoning sacrifice till He opened their closed eyes to see their guilt, and the Savior's grace.



No sinner in the world cares to seek a Savior till the Spirit awakens the conscience and guides him to the one great Remedy for sin. We might suppose that sinners could have no quietness or ease in their minds while in their natural state; but the contrary is awfully true. Most sinners have "no bands" (Psalm 72:4), either in life or death; "their strength is firm," their sleep in sin is very deep, until the Spirit breathe on them. Their peace is an unreal peace; but still, it is true that they go on from day to day unconcerned about meeting the Holy One, except when startled by some flagrant act of transgression.

Dr. Malan tells how he enjoyed "an entire freedom from all misgiving" as to the future, and lived on "in the uttermost repose of ignorance" up to the time of his conversion. I could tell of an infidel, outspoken and decided, who, within a few minutes of his death, held out his arm and asked a Christian neighbor to put his hand on his pulse that he might testify how calm and composed and fearless he was in the moment of dying. The truth is, all the world over, that such is the normal state of sinners; the world is in profound slumber and indifference as to sin. But from day to day the Holy Spirit goes forth "into all the earth" (Revelation 5:6) awaking slumberers and rescuing them from Satan, who goes "to and fro in the earth," casting men into this deep sleep, and thus deceiving the whole world.

The kind, patient, longsuffering love of the Spirit is infinitely wonderful. He works calmly, and (we may say) in self-hiding silence, willing to be unnoticed in His working. Are not calmness and silence the peculiar style of divinity?

"In silence mighty things are wrought -
Each nightly star in silence burns,
And every day in silence turns
The axle of the earth."

So it was with the Spirit's mighty working in Creation; for Genesis 1:3 tells of His "moving on the face of the waters," a word which, as all writers agree, refers to the brooding of the mother-bird when patiently and in silence she sends forth penetrating warmth, instinct with life. And, as the grand result, what a world was disclosed when the Father and the Son bade light appear, and the wonders of the firmament, and the rich furnishings of the dry land, and the abundant increase of all kinds in the air and sea, till man, in the midst of Eden, crowned the whole.

We are never to forget that the Spirit has been working silently, but most effectually, day after day. In the Courts of Israel's Sanctuary His emblem was yonder Laver, filled to the brim with pure, crystal water. Silently it gleamed in the bright sunshine, presenting to Israel the type of that Holy Spirit, whose it is to sanctify, bestowing quietly the holy purity of heaven. And at Christ's Baptism, when He ascended, was not His emblem the Dove? — gentle, and still, and calm, like Him on whom He rested? And if anyone should suggest that Acts 2:2 is not all stillness, we must carefully notice that properly the words read, "Suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a mighty breathing, borne along." The word is the word for "breath," or "breathing," the same as Genesis 2:7, reminding us of Christ in the upper room (John 20:22), and of the mighty "breath" (Ezekiel 37:9) that "breathed upon the slain," like the gentle breeze in a summer evening.

But now we come to notice some of the things which Christ spoke concerning Him who so deserves our love and praise, and whose it is to accomplish such amazing changes in the hearts and lives of men. We shall dwell on that summary of His work given in John 16:7-11: "If I depart, I will send Him unto you" - to you, My disciples. "And when He is come (to you, My disciples) He will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment." Here is a brief statement of His work in bringing sinners out of their state of nature into the kingdom of God.

(1) "He will reprove the world of sin; because they believe not on Me." The word reprove is an old English word which has the same meaning as convince (see Job 6:25, Psalm 50:21). The Spirit convinces, that is, He gives to the soul a sight and a sense of sin. Just as at the great day, in which Enoch's prophecy declares that the Lord as Judge will "convince all that are ungodly of all their ungodly deeds and of all their hard speeches"; so now, when the Spirit comes into the soul He makes the sinner see and feel the tremendous evil of sin. The awakened

sinner's judgment-day may be said to be when he sees and feels his guilt, and looks for deliverance to the very Lord against whom he has sinned. He sees and feels that his greatest sin by far has been, not believing on Christ—neglecting Him, rejecting Him, letting Him stand at the door knocking in vain, for months and years.

Natural conscience never troubles a man in regard to this sin; the man fancies (if he thinks of it at all) that it is at most, a misfortune, and that himself is the only loser. But when the Spirit touches the conscience, the sinner's eyes are opened to see that this unbelief is the worst of sins, and the root-sin in his heart. The sharpest arrow shot into his conscience is the sense of this sin. For now he sees that Christ was more deeply wounded by this sin than by all other sins. "Ye will not come to Me!" was the one only complaint He was heard uttering. As if He had said, "I came to the gate of Eden, and opened it for you at the cost of infinite suffering, letting the flaming sword be sheathed in My soul. And yet ye would not come in! I rolled away the stone from the Well of Life, letting Myself be crushed and bruised and broken as I did it. And yet ye would not drink, nay, you hated Me because I brought this life to you, and told you that without this you must die" (John 8:24). It was (to compare great things with small) like the act of the Russian soldier, who, when approached by one who brought water for his thirst, and help for his wounds, thrust his deadly bayonet into his benefactor's heart.

But more; the Spirit convinces the sinner that in thus refusing Christ he has struck at the heart of the Father. He has "called God a liar, because he has not believed the record God has given of His Son" (1 John 5:10). The sinner disdained to listen to the Father, treating all He said about the Beloved Son as mere words without meaning, idle tales. And so he made God to be a LIAR! Who can tell the agony of a soul when first it discovers all this sin?

In the Civil War it was not uncommon for such a scene to occur as the following. Two brothers go out to the battlefield, but on opposite sides. The battle begins; one brother takes his aim surely, and sees a young soldier in the enemy's ranks fall dead. He watches his opportunity, and triumphantly goes up to examine the foe whom he has struck dead. But see, his countenance changes! He is in an agony of grief! It was his own brother whose heart he pierced. Will the anguish of that moment ever be forgotten? Will it not haunt him to the grave? Even such the sinner's anguish when the discovery bursts upon him of what he has done in rejecting Christ. Like John Newton, he cries, "I saw my sins His blood had spilt"; and he looks round inquiring:

"Where shall my trembling soul be hid,
For I the Lord have slain?"

And then once more. The Spirit shows the sinner that by his unbelief he was all along virtually refusing to take pardon for his sins, thrusting the Savior from him, and saying, "Away with Him! Away with Him! Trouble me not!" He was resolving

to go up to the judgment-seat with all his guilt upon him. And thus he was refusing peremptorily to part with his corruptions and his sinful nature; he was determining to remain unholy and impure, for there is no beginning of holiness until sin is pardoned.

Oh, what an abyss of evil is revealed to the sinner in the hour when the Spirit convinces him, as Christ says, "of sin, because he believes not on Me!" No wonder the 3000 souls (men, women, and children), on the day of Pentecost so cried out in fear and anguish of heart, when the Spirit, silently, but with almighty power, showed this sin of unbelief, and charged it home on each, while Peter pointed to the crucified Son of God.

(2) "Of righteousness, because I go to My Father, and ye see Me no more" (verse 10). Carrying on conversion-work, the Spirit does not stop at conviction of sin, but shows the awakened soul how that tremendous guilt of unbelief and all other sin may be taken away. In other words, He goes on to show where the sinner may find righteousness—may find all that will set him right with God against whom he has sinned.

Here also He works silently, but very powerfully. Go down to that river-side, and notice how Lydia is made to drop the filthy rags of devout self-righteousness while Paul is preaching Christ (Acts 16:14). Or, go to the way that leads to Gaza, and watch the scales fall from the eyes of that anxious Ethiopian, as he listens to Philip telling simply of the Lamb led to the slaughter (Acts 8. 32, 37). It is the Holy Spirit, and only He, who can persuade and enable a sinner to let go his rags and accept the best robe. It is only He who convinces a man that his righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, if he would cross the threshold and enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5. 20). He carries the sinner away to Palestine and shows him One there who has come down from heaven to provide righteousness for sinners.

It is Emmanuel, God in our nature, who, for thirty-years, lives for us and bears our burden. He lives (so to speak) over again, the life of Abel, the life of Enoch, the life of Noah, the life of Abraham, the life of all believers, in all ages, giving for them to God, an obedience as broad as the law, and as pure as the heart of God. He bears also, the penalty of our disobedience, the wrath of God, submitting to all that justice demanded, baring His whole human being to the infliction of the law's sentence, receiving the execution of Divine vengeance on sin in all the sensibilities of His human nature, and at last bowing His head in profound acquiescence. All was FINISHED. "Finished!" was His own declaration; and on the third day, the Father reechoed that testimony by raising Him from the tomb in glory and honor and power.

But over and over must the sure testimony be given, and it must be given in heaven, and so, on the fortieth day, you see Him with His eleven disciples, slowly climbing the Mount of Olives, in the afternoon. All is peace and delight as He

talks with them, when suddenly He lifts His holy hands (they see on them the mark of the nails), and breathing blessing on them, begins to ascend to the Father. He has gone up to present, in person, His finished righteousness. If He is sent back to earth again, then the Father has not accepted the righteousness as entirely satisfying; but if "ye see Me no more" - if He is taken in at once and welcomed - then all is well. His righteousness, wrought out for us, has been accepted.

And so He moved onward through the ranks of angels to the Father's Throne, and, as He drew near, Oh, the ineffable delight that shone forth from the Father, as He welcomed the Beloved Son. "Sit down at My right hand!" was heard and seen by all the hosts of heaven; but His eleven disciples saw Him no more. Most surely then, the righteousness He wrought out for sinners has been accepted! There it is, that in the person of the God-Man, as Peter (2 Peter 1:1) writes, we find, "The righteousness of Him who is God and our Savior, Jesus Christ."

There was awful suspense that day at Derry, when the ship that was laden with relief for the beleaguered city was approaching the boom; but oh, the shouts of joy when the chain yielded and the vessel sailed safely in! There was most anxious suspense when Esther passed into the presence of the king—will he hold out the Golden Scepter? or shall she go forth rejected? And so, may we suppose among the hosts of heaven something like anxious emotion, at least, till the Father had spoken His infinite satisfaction, and then all was immeasurable delight. Now may men know where to find righteousness! Now may sinners be led by the Holy Spirit to Him, in believing on whom they find themselves clothed with beauty, the righteousness of God.

For the Spirit shows the sinner that he becomes knit to, is united to, is one with that Savior, the righteous One, the very moment he accepts Him as his Savior. And so the sinner is taught by the Spirit to reason: "If He and I are one, then His righteousness is mine, His merit is mine; I need no more for my justification than what I find in Him."

It was when the Spirit opened John Bunyan's eyes to see this truth, that he finally gained the victory over all his sore temptations. "One day," he says, "as I was passing in the field, suddenly this sentence fell upon my soul, "Thy righteousness is in Heaven," and me thought withal I saw with the eyes of my soul, Jesus Christ at God's right hand—there as my righteousness—so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, "He wants (does not have) My righteousness, for there it was before Him."

John Bunyan goes on to tell, "I saw that the good frame of my heart could not make my righteousness better, nor yet the bad frame of my heart make my righteousness worse; for my righteousness was Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever. Now did my chains fall off—I was loosed from affliction and iron. My temptations also fled away." From that day he reckoned all

his own feelings, and all grace in himself, as of no consequence whatever, in his justification; a rich man cares nothing for cracked coins in his purse, for he has his trunk full of gold at home. "O, blessed Spirit, convince every anxious soul of righteousness!"

(3) "Of judgment, because the Prince of this world is judged." One of the meanings of this word "judgment" is a law-suit or cause to be adjudicated upon. In regard to the great cause on hand the Spirit will make all clear to you. Ever since the Fall, Satan has claimed this world as his; but Christ, the woman's seed, even Christ, came to dispute that claim on man's behalf. At the Cross He gained His cause, and Satan lost his. Satan was there "judged" or doomed; pronounced to be an infamous usurper, who shall assuredly be cast out with all who are on his side.

Three different times does Christ call the devil by the name Prince of this World (John 12:31, 14:30, and here). It seems to me very likely that our Master was wont, from time to time, to give His favored disciples some notices of incidents in His history that were not public, and among the rest He had related to them the story of the Temptation. He would tell how Satan, on that occasion, boldly and daringly, claimed all earth as his kingdom and property, "all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them, "and had said, "all this power and the glory of them, is delivered unto me, and to whomsoever I will I give it" (Luke 4:6). And thus the disciples at once understood whom the Master meant, and why He called him the "Prince of this World."

When the Holy Spirit comes to the sinner in His saving operations, He completes His work by causing the awakened and justified soul clearly to see that Satan, "Prince of this World, "is judged, doomed, damned, though for a short time still allowed to go to and fro on the earth. The sinner now clearly sees that to take the glory of the world—the goodly things of earth—as his portion, is to accept a gift from Satan and own him as Lord over us. The glory of the world—earth's grandeur, wealth, gaieties, pleasures, lusts, ungodly fashions, all belong to Satan, and he "gives them to whomsoever he will." But the Spirit teaches the awakened and justified sinner to shake himself loose from all that Satan thus offers as a bribe to retain his dominion over sinners.

The man who delights in "the glory of the world" as offered by Satan, is on Satan's side, and must be "judged" with him. Very soon, all that "fashion of the world" will "pass away" (1 Corinthians 7:31), and "the lust thereof" (1 John 2:17), swept into the bottomless pit with "The Prince of this World" (see Revelation 18:14-24). And the time is at hand. And so the Holy Spirit separates us from the world lying in wickedness, and casts out of our hearts whatever is not of God. For now He Himself not only comes, but dwells in the soul, which He has "convinced of sin, and righteousness, and judgment."

People of God, you have thus learned Christ. And we wish you to remember that

the Spirit dwelling in you will repeat oftentimes the first great lesson about sin, righteousness, and judgment. He will again and again renew His first operations, thereby keeping you ever decided and watchful and fervent for the Lord. And we seem justified in inferring from v. 7, "come to you," compared with v. 8, "and when He is come (i.e., to you) He will convince the world." That it is His method, as a rule, in going forth to bring in more souls from the world, to begin by a fresh dealing with you who are already His.

It was thus at Pentecost, and in all ages this has been His usual manner of working. Revivals begin with God's own people; the Holy Spirit touches their heart anew, and gives them new fervor and compassion, and zeal, new light and life, and when He has thus come to you, He next goes forth to the valley of dry bones.

Is this the divine order? Oh, what responsibility it lays on the God's Church! You first, then the unsaved world! If you grieve the Holy Spirit away from yourselves or hinder His proffered visit, then the poor perishing world suffers sorely! But every time you welcome the Spirit, and again get blessing through His working in you, you may expect that He is on His way to save others. He fills the well to the brim, and then its waters flow over and make all green around. He does not, we have said, work without you. So true is this that we might put the case in this startling form, viz., "Without Me ye can do nothing," says the Master; but He also says, "And without you I can do nothing!"

This is a very solemn truth for the Church of God. And at the same time it is a wonderful privilege that is involved in this truth, We are honored to do what angels are not; saints are they who are sent in the footsteps of the Son of Man to seek and save the lost. Angels can only say (almost with envy), "Go you, stand in the temple, and preach all the words of this life" (Acts. 5:20); they themselves are not employed on this high errand. Let us do far more than we have done.

It has been often noticed that it is the overflow from the well that spreads lush greenness. Even so, it is what a Christian does for Christ and souls, over and above mere duty, constrained not by law but by burning love, it is this that is blessed to the saving of souls. When the Spirit fills you thus, He has found a channel by which to flow out to others! When you cannot help doing more than you are strictly called to do, it seems as if then, He had "come to you," and were on His way to the world around you.