

My Testimony

Acts 15:9

Pastor Ernest O'Neill

It is good for every one of us to give our testimony from time to time, and though you have suffered mine before, I think that I should give it today.

I was born in Belfast about 46 years ago into a working-class home. My dad worked in the shipyards in Belfast and we had enough money, but not much more than enough money. I went to the local Methodist church which was a fairly evangelical, fairly big church. Belfast is a city of about one half million people. As I came up I began to go to Sunday School from about the age of five or six and always had a great belief in God and always prayed to God. You know the three prayers you always do--the "Our Father", the "God bless Dad and Mum", and the "Gentle Jesus meek and mild." I always did those prayers, especially during the war years of 1939-45. The shipyard was a target for the German bombers so my dad would go down there to see how things were, and of course I was very conscious that only God could take care of him. I certainly believed in God during those early years.

When I was thirteen we had a Sunday School teacher who I would have thought then was just a wild old Fundamentalist, but the beauty of it was, he believed God's Word. One Sunday afternoon he told us about the lake of fire, which was the first time I'd ever heard of it. He said at the end of this life there was a hell or an outer darkness, a great lonely place where there was no life. Of course, he presented it as it is presented in Revelation, as a lake of fire where you burn forever in your own selfishness and what you have become. That really scared me. He used the verses: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" and "The wages of sin is death." I don't know that I really felt that I was a sinner; I just felt that it would be circumspect and prudent to be on the same side as the owner of the lake of fire, so I stayed behind after that Sunday School class and prayed and received as best I could Jesus as my Savior, though I could never get the hang of what it meant -- Savior. I really didn't like that term too much, to tell you the truth. I didn't like the idea that Jesus was my Savior, but I liked the idea of Him being my helper and guide.

From 13 to 17, when I went to university, that was my situation. I would say that I was a believer the way Jesus says, "There are believers but they really don't do what I tell them to do; they believe all the right things." If you had said to me, "Do you believe that Jesus is the Savior of the world?" I would have said, "Yes." If you had said, "Do you believe He is your Savior?" I would have known that you wanted me to say "Yes", and so I would have said "Yes", but I didn't like the idea of having to be saved by anybody.

At 17 I began to come up against the agony of the old sex thing -- a power that I couldn't control and a power that did make me feel dirty at times. Through that I think God began to show me other things in my life that were not obedient to Him and that were in fact sin. I began to see the meaning of "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" and "The wages of sin is death." I had already begun at that time to think through the reasons for believing in God and for believing the Bible, so I did believe that those things were true. I began to see that I was headed for eternal death because my life was filled with things that were dishonest. I would tell a lie when it suited me, I would be

unkind and cruel to my brother when it suited me, I would do whatever I wanted to do. I saw that I was doing things that were disobedient to God day after day, and I began to think, "Now Jesus must fit into this somehow." It was then that I came into contact with a guy who asked me that question. He said, "Do you believe that Jesus is the Savior of the world?" and I said, "Yes, I do." He said, "Do you believe that He is your Savior?" and I said "That He died for me?" and he said, "Yes." I said, "Oh, yes, yes I do," but I really didn't.

So I stopped my ordinary prayer times and I started--even though I was a miserable old Protestant--to do what you loved ones in the Catholic Church are taught to do from an early age: the Stations of the Cross. I don't know the Stations of the Cross, but I certainly in my own mind began to see that I must somehow see the reality of this death that took place on Calvary; I must somehow find out what the meaning of this is. I began to spend my prayer time thinking about Jesus dying on the cross. Of course, I had a skeptical kind of mind and it was hard for me to think this man actually died, and then I began to think, "You mean there is a place somewhere in this world, probably in Palestine, where his cross actually made a hole in the ground?" I would try to think my intellectual way through to that--this man actually died on a cross in Palestine. I began to imagine Jesus' death on the cross. That's what I did for weeks and months.

As I began to come into those verses in Isaiah that say He was despised and rejected of men and He carried our sins--and then I began to see the words that He cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast Thou, of all people, forsaken me, of all people?" I began to see him speaking to the Roman soldiers and saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Then it was a miracle I suppose of the Holy Spirit, but I sensed that He was speaking right down the centuries and looking at me and saying, "Father, forgive him for he knows not what he does." Somehow I didn't know why He had died, I didn't know what it had to do with my sins being forgiven, but I knew that He had died for me, and that if I had been the only person in the whole world, He would still have died for me. I just had a great sense that He was my dear Friend and Savior. I would say, loved ones, that that was the New Birth experience for me. My heart was changed inside and I began to want to please Him and to love Him, I began to read the Bible and pray and to give my life to Him more and more. So when He appeared to be saying that I should go into the ministry, I wanted to go into the ministry.

We didn't have a lot of money in our home to send people to seminaries, so the only way I could ever get to the university was by getting a teaching scholarship. So that's what I did. At 17 I got a teaching scholarship to Queens University in Belfast and I studied English literature. I then went to teachers training school and then back to my old high school and taught English there for two or three years. It was during my second year at the university that it seemed to me Jesus was saying, "Nevertheless, impossible though it is, you have to come and be a minister." I said "Yes" to Him and began to do examinations in connection with the Methodist church. At the same time as I graduated from the university and from teacher training college I candidated for the Methodist ministry. For the next five years I spent the time in what we call probation work at the university in Belfast, and then the last three years I went to seminary and did the divinity degree.

During all that time, loved ones, I became more and more conscious that though I knew my sins were forgiven, there was a great struggle inside me. I was always aware of the reality of Romans 7:15: "The good that I would I cannot do, and the evil I hate is what I do." I was aware of that. From the early days in the ministry you have to smile. That's the big thing--smile all the time. (We had

smiling classes at seminary -- No, we didn't.) But if somebody criticizes you, you smile. If somebody is unkind to you, you smile. So I did that and kept on doing that even after I was ordained.

I was ordained in Dublin in 1960. I met my dear one through Jesus just showing us that we were for each other, and that was a miraculous thing too. We married and served in Donegal for a year. At that time I sensed that God wanted us to go to London so that I could do Old Testament studies at London University, so we went to London and spent two years there. I always wondered, how does God work in people's hearts and how does He move a church into life and into dynamic relationship with Himself? And so when an opportunity came to take a church in London, I again took a church and gave up the studies. We served a church in London and came to the end of that year, and then the question was whether to go back to Ireland or not.

At that time I began to ask God, "Lord, where do you want us to go?" and I would say even though I was in a half-hearted state in my relationship with God at that time, God always answers you if you really want Him to answer you with all your heart, if you pray and are willing to do whatever He tells you, it seems whatever state you are in He somehow has pity on you. I asked Him what he wanted us to do and after days and nights in prayer He said, "Go to America." I didn't want to go to America because America had lots of money and I felt if you are following Jesus you don't spend time in places with lots of money; you spend time where people are in poverty. So it was very hard to eventually say "yes".

I did say yes and went to a neighboring pastor and asked him if he knew anybody in America, and he said he knew the Bishop of Minnesota who would be in London the next week. We had dinner with the Bishop of Minnesota the next week and then I came to America in 1963. I served a Methodist church in Minneapolis for about a year and a half and then was an associate pastor in a downtown church for a year. During that time I became aware more and more that I was not what a Christian was supposed to be, especially after I arrived in America and I met "a man with a shining face." That's the name of a book written by another man who had the same experience. I met a man who seemed to live in victory; that is, he seemed to live outside what he was inside. I was not. I could smile if you criticized my sermon but my knuckles would be white, gripping the chair to hold myself back from asking you how many lectures you had done in homiletics or in theology. It was the old pretense, the old hypocritical life.

I was free from outward sins, more or less. I don't think you could have pointed a finger much at my outward life, but my problem was inward sin. Anger never showed itself outside, because we were always taught at least you should have the control that Plato and Socrates had over their outward life. We were taught that self-discipline should enable you to be a gentleman to people on the outside--so I could control that stuff, but it seethed within. Resentment rising inside when somebody criticized you. Unclean thoughts--outwardly a life of cleanliness, but inside a life of uncleanness. Thoughts that shouldn't be there--not thoughts that just pop into your mind and pop out again, but thoughts that I entertained and welcomed. I just sensed that there had to be something better than this and indeed came to the point where I felt, "I'll go insane if this continues" because I could be praying to Jesus and sinning in my own thoughts at the same time. I felt there had to be an answer.

At a meeting in North Minneapolis I once shared this, and a man at the back explained that he was a

missionary in Bolivia and had for years lived the same hypocrisy, and that there was an answer. Bit by bit he told me about his own experience and then gave me some books to read written by old Methodist bishops years and years ago in America. These books explained clearly to me that the problem in my life was that there was something inside me that never had actually been changed or touched by God. At first I couldn't believe it,

because I felt I had given myself to Jesus and received Him into my heart. These books said, "Ask the Holy Spirit to show you what is in there." I was taught in seminary to believe in the Holy Spirit, but I thought "It" was a force. I know I should have known better. I know He is called the third person of the Trinity, but I felt that the Holy Spirit was an "It"--a force or an atmosphere that comes upon a meeting at certain times. These books said, "No! The Holy Spirit is a Person." They pointed out that Jesus said, "I will send to you the Holy Spirit. It is to your advantage that I go away, because if I don't go away the Comforter will not come to you. But when I go He will come and He will lead you into all truth." Jesus called Him the Counsellor. These books said, "You should ask the Counsellor to show you what is inside you that has not been touched by God."

That is what I did. I started to ask the Holy Spirit in my prayer time to show me what was inside me that I had never yielded to God. Over weeks and months I saw things that I could not believe. The Holy Spirit was faithful and He will be faithful to you if you are willing to look. The Holy Spirit began to show me that it wasn't just the outward sins that were the problem, but there was in me inward sin which was me. I couldn't believe that. I felt that a feeling of sin was a feeling of sin, or a desire for sin was a desire for sin, or a sinful act was a sinful act, or a sinful word was a sinful word, but I could not believe that I was sin. Then I began to see verses such as Isaiah uses where he says, "I am a man of unclean lips." Not just "I speak unclean words" but "I am a man of unclean lips."

The Holy Spirit began to show me that when I would waken up in the morning with praise on my lips it was pride in my own insights into Christianity and my ability to explain it to others. I would see, "This is hopeless. If I'm that corrupt, I can never clean myself. If I am that proud I can never overcome it, because it is self itself that is proud." I knew the lust--that was clear and easy; but I didn't know the depth of my selfishness, the selfish ambition. I don't know how you men are, but the ladies are supposed to be proud of the way they look. We men are supposed to be proud of what we can achieve and we always have this burden to achieve something. I had that: selfish ambition to be successful and to be well-known. I saw that there was such dirt and rottenness in me that there was no way in which I could separate it from myself. It was true what the Holy Spirit was saying: I myself was sin!

Loved ones, I became utterly convinced it was me that was the problem. It was myself. In spite of the fact that I appeared to live for God, I really lived for myself. I wasn't really living for God at all, I was living subtly to elevate myself and to gratify myself and to get others to exalt me and not to exalt Jesus. Bit by bit the Holy Spirit convinced me that there was no way in which I could deliver myself from this.

Then a whole area of truth opened up to me that I had never seen before; I just never knew of it. That is why I share it with you, because it was so absolutely new to me. We were taught in Northern Ireland that Jesus died for you. I always reckoned that was so that I wouldn't have to die. I was relieved at that. I had never heard, even though I had read it in the Bible often, that I died with Jesus. Now you: say, "People must have told you!" They must have. I must have read it somewhere in

books, but it never came to me. Likewise it will never come to you until you are in desperate need for that experience. The Holy Spirit pointed me to a chapter that I had never understood--Romans 6. I read there: "All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death." I always read that as being baptized into the benefits of His death. Then I began to see that the Greek word "baptizo" means to be immersed, and it means we are immersed in His death. Then I read these incredible words in verse 6: "We know that our old self was crucified with Christ so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin."

Well, I knew I was enslaved to sin. Then I saw that my old self was crucified with Christ, and I could not believe it. It was double Dutch at first to me. How could my old self that I was experiencing now, be crucified with Christ? Then I saw it was the same way as my sins. My sins were borne by Jesus, but they weren't taken away from me, they weren't forgiven until I believed it and was willing to let go of them. So I saw it was the same with myself. I was crucified with Christ but I would have to bear it in my own being and personality until I was willing to let it go. I saw that it had been crucified with Christ in eternity--the self that was proud and selfish and lustful was actually destroyed in Jesus, and it didn't exist anymore except in the deception that I was under in allowing the ghost of it to remain and to retain an influence in my life.

Bit by bit I began to see that it was true: my old self had been crucified with Christ. There was actually no problem in getting rid of it. God had already done that and the Holy Spirit would take the things of Jesus and make them real to me if I wanted it. That was the crux -- if I wanted it. So I began to wrestle with whether I was really willing to live no longer for myself but for God. I had often said I wanted to live for God, but the Holy Spirit began to point out the thousand little ways in which I drew attention to myself in conversation, the thousand little ways in which I was worried more by what people did to me rather than by what they did to God. The thousand little ways in which I wanted people to think well of me, the thousand little ways in which I lost my temper not because God was being abused but because somebody was getting in my way.

The Holy Spirit showed me that it meant letting go of all these things, and then I began to see a little of the Cross. I've shared often with you the whole business of anger. We get angry because things aren't going our way and we want to pull them back under our control, so we think we will make them fearful because of our anger or our bad temper. I began to see that that was my life--always concerned with whether I was in control or things were going my way. The Holy Spirit came more and more home to me, "Are you willing to die with Jesus to yourself and to your own satisfaction? Are you willing to live only for His glory?" Loved ones, I don't know what it will be like with you, but I was 30, so I had masses of controlled surrenders that I had subtly arranged in my life. I had a hard-packed soil of rejection -- and resistances to God's will that I had built over the years. The Holy Spirit had to go down through all that stuff. There would come days when I felt I was willing, and the next day I'd be back in the old anger and temper and envy and selfishness, and I knew that I wasn't willing. These books kept saying when you get to the ground of your heart the Holy Spirit will witness that you are there. I would get to a place where I would feel I was there, and the next day I would know I wasn't there; I was back in the old life.

Gradually over a period of weeks and months the Holy Spirit dug down underneath the layers, underneath all the mass of that inward self, until one morning in North Minneapolis in the parsonage, the Holy Spirit put me the question: "Would you be willing to be nothing for Jesus' glory?" Self, of course, always pops up and says, "What good would that do, being nothing?" By that time I'd begun to listen to the Holy Spirit and to hear Him over the noise of self and He said, "That isn't it. Would you be willing to be nothing, to be a failure, not be known at all, to be

ignored, to be an absolute failure for the rest of your life if it was for Jesus' glory?" I at last whispered, "Yes."

Loved ones, I think that was full consecration, just presenting my body a living sacrifice which is our reasonable service. I was at last saying, "Lord, I will live for you only because this is the only purpose of our lives, and there is no point of me building up a little temporal kingdom that will end after seventy years. I am here for your use and for whatever you want." It was the lifting of the center of my life from self unto God. I just had a quiet assurance that the Holy Spirit had come in and cleansed my heart.

God is always so good. The next morning, I received a letter from a colleague whom I was ahead of academically in Belfast but he had concentrated on getting the doctorate in psychology while I was slogging my way trying to find out how God worked in churches. Every time I received a letter from him I thought "I should have done that," and the old envy always popped up. I received the letter, opened it and there was no envy -- nothing! That was good. So it is real! The Holy Spirit can actually cleanse and fill your heart. He can take away the selfishness and the hatred and the resentment and He can bring about in your heart love, joy, and peace so that it comes from inside. The issue is not, "Do you sin?" I'm sure I sin a hundred times. Before I couldn't help sinning because of the mess that was rising inside. Now if I sin it is my own fault--just my own fault--because now there is a desire to obey God rather than to disobey Him. That's the change, loved ones. It is not the issue of whether you never sin. The issue is that you are free from the power of sin. You are at last free not to sin if you so choose. It's natural to obey, where before it was natural to sin.

My life just changed from then. I never had trouble until then, of course. I never had problems. I never had difficulties with the congregation, because I always preached so nicely that I persuaded everybody to agree with me. Then I started to preach that sin was a problem in our lives; that we did not obey God and we wanted to elevate self and play all kinds of spiritual games instead of obey God. Then, of course, the trouble came, but I never had such glory until then. I never had such outward trouble. I eventually left the Methodist Church, taught in Benilde High School and preached in a Presbyterian church on the campus, fought most of my way--but never such peace in my heart, never such freedom from inward conflict.

Maybe a year or two later I spoke in tongues in my own apartment, but that is nothing. Don't get caught up with spiritual games. They don't matter. Don't get caught up with demons and all that stuff. The Holy Spirit came to cleanse our hearts and make us pure within, and somehow when you are cleansed and your heart is pure, then you are ready to be used by God. Loved ones, until then He doesn't bother telling you what to do in your life. God doesn't waste words when He knows fine well you can't hear Him, or if you do hear Him you won't obey Him anyway. God is only able to tell you what to do with your life when you get through to whatever you want to call it. I frankly think "fullness of the Spirit" is maybe one of the best word because, in a sense, the Spirit has come into you when you were born of God but He isn't filling you completely. Whether you call it the fullness of the Spirit, baptism of the Spirit, a clean heart, full surrender or full consecration, it doesn't matter.

The fact is, most of us have had the same kind of experience as Saul on the Damascus road. We met Jesus as Savior and then there was a gap before we met Him as our Lord. Only when we were ready to meet him as the Lord of our life and allow Him to take over our lives completely was He able to fill us with His Spirit. It is only then that power comes into your life--power for service. I would just

tell you God has given us a great vision. We are a privileged people. It really doesn't matter whether you are just a little one starting off in the body; we have a very clear and exciting vision. It is not a vision that actually anybody needs to back off; it is just a vision of getting 10,000 of us living abroad, doing our jobs, involved together in businesses or schools for Jesus. Any of us can take part in that.

Here is the point: you would just be a hindrance if you are not filled with the Holy Spirit. You would just be a hindrance until your heart is clean. But when your heart is clean and when you have entered into that crucifixion with Christ, Jesus will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and you will have power to do things you cannot do at the present. Until you are baptized with the Holy Spirit, you really will not only have a powerless life on the outside, but you will have an impure, defeated life on the inside.

Now loved ones, there is no mystery to it. You just start seeking Him. The first thing I did was to settle in my mind that the Bible promised this. The Bible said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." The Bible promises clean hearts. Acts 15:9: "And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith." "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." The first thing is to settle: Does God want this in your life? The second thing is to go for it with all your heart and not to pity self or cry over self or protest that you have a right to sin or rationalize your sin. The third thing is to go for it with all your heart. God will answer. Jesus promised, "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled."

For those of us who want to continue the old half-life, where we want to be good Jews who have our sins forgiven but do not have victory over sin, the Bible doesn't give much reassurance. That's up to you if you choose that life. I don't know that it is actually an alternative. I think you either go all or nothing. You have to decide. It doesn't matter how long it takes you. It doesn't matter even if you are in it this moment-- but are you hungering for it?

If you say to me, "Well, brother, if you are going to keep at this I'll have to leave" --well, you can choose whether to leave or not. You don't have to leave. It seems to me what God wants is a body of brothers and sisters who love each other and are understanding and tender towards each other and give each other all the time in the world to get the victory. God wants a group of people who are hungering after this with all their hearts. It is not whether you are in it or not, but whether you are hungering after it. John Wesley used to ask the preachers who were going to candidate for him, "Are you hungering with all your heart for cleanness and purity within?" He didn't say, "Are you crucified with Christ?" but "Are you hungering for this with all your heart?" That's what I'd say to you. Are you hungering for this with all your heart? If you are, then welcome to the family, and let us go for purity and cleanliness and for the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

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