

Mr. William Shirreff (1762-1832) was a wonderful Scotch Presbyterian preacher who converted to the Baptists over the issue of infant Baptism. The Presbytery, unwilling to lose a minister so distinguished for piety and popular gifts, tried by every means to retain him, sending two ministers weekly to try and win him back. He had, however, counted the cost, and it was useless to seek to persuade him to withdraw his resignation. In the meanwhile, many infants were waiting to be baptized, and as the assistant minister, not being ordained, could not baptize them, and Mr. Shirreff would not, the poor little dears left for a while as Christ intended them to remain until they grew up, and believed on Him. Mrs. Shirreff, who did not then fully understand her husband's change of views, said that there was a great talk in the country about his refusing to baptize the infants, and she thought as the Presbytery would not accept his resignation that he should in the meantime baptize the children. His reply was a right noble one, *"How can I stand up to baptize an infant in the name, which means amongst other things, by the authority of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, although there is no such authority, and I know there is no such authority? I would not do it for the world."* She never asked him again, but was herself afterwards baptized according to the Scriptural fashion.

This was in 1823. It was a painful season when he parted from his beloved people, many of whom were bound to him by spiritual ties; giving up his large income; leaving the manse (parsonage) which had been built for him; and meeting with reproach; but he endured as seeing him who is invisible. He preached his farewell sermon from Acts 20:32, to wit:

***"And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified."* Acts 20:32.**

The large old church, always full when he preached, was crowded. The sight of the preacher's face was touching, as he stood up with hands uplifted in prayer; his quivering lips and faltering voice showed that he was scarcely able to control his emotion, but God graciously strengthened His servant, and enabled him to preach in his usual faithful and impressive manner. The people waited for him, and lined all the road to the Manse (Parsonage). He was unable to speak, but covered his eyes with one hand, and held out the other to his dear people. (Like some kind of conquering Roman military hero? Fresh from slaughtering thousands of Rome's enemies? What do these goofy Presbyterians think they're doing?)

When Mr. Shirreff's health began to fail, he was urged by his son, a medical student, to retire to the country, but he would not be persuaded, and continued to preach till within five weeks of his death. At the time that his last illness commenced the church met, and fasted and prayed for his recovery; but it was not the will of God to grant their request. His servant's labors were ended, and he was going home. When one of his children went into his room during the last week of his life, he said to her, *"Mary, take care that you are found on the side of truth; take care that you are not ashamed of the truth."* She burst into tears, as the thought forced itself upon her mind that her dear father believed himself to be dying. The doctor who was attending him proposed a consultation, as he was suffering from a chronic catarrh, and a complication of complaints. When the doctors were with him, one of them said to him, *"You will soon be in a better world, sir."* He did not answer, but as soon as they were gone he lifted up his eyes and hands to heaven, saying, *"O God, I thank thee that this does not give me a painful surprise."*

At another time he said, *"The Gospel is our only resource when we come here."* He also took the hand of his dear wife in his, saying, *"You have nobly discharged relative duties to me."* On the day before his death his face shone with a supernatural brightness, and he said to Mrs. Shirreff, *"Who are these? What fine singing!"* She told him that there was no one there, but he pointed to the top of the bed and exclaimed, *"They are there. What fine singing!"* He spoke constantly till he died, but his speech was inarticulate. The following morning at nine o'clock he entered into rest, having nearly reached the allotted three-score years and ten.

Mr. Spurgeon had many good things to say of Mr. Shirreff, his friend; including the following, upon his death; to wit: *"A man who so lived, and so died, deserves to be heard when speaking upon the subject out of which grew the trial of his life. He being dead yet speaketh; God grant that his voice may be heard."* Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Mr. Shirreff was also survived by a good wife, Mary Russell Shirreff, whom he married in 1804. Her father also was a minister, and Mr. Spurgeon called her *"one of the excellent of the earth,"* adding: *"and that she greatly increased her husband's usefulness as a minister."* Mr. Shirreff aimed at excellence, not only in religion, but in everything. We learn from his diary, in which he made an entry every day, how unreservedly he sought to bring all his powers of soul and body into complete subjection to the divine will.

Though he had great gifts as a preacher, and was very highly esteemed and almost idolized by his people, yet during the first years of his ministry he had not that light and peace and joy which he afterwards realized. Often did he cry out with the apostle Paul, *"O wretched man that I am ! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"* (Rom. 7:24.) Perhaps this experience was partly at least caused by the peculiar constitution of his mind, which would receive nothing without very clear and positive proof. He took occasion in after years to warn his family against the error into which he had fallen in this matter; for he had been tempted to question all the grand doctrines of the Gospel, and to examine the ground of the commonest truths of the Word. He studied hard in order to satisfy himself with regard to the evidences of Christianity, and the authenticity of the Scriptures; and as the result of his investigations he told his children, and also wrote in his diary, that he was thoroughly satisfied concerning the internal and external evidences of Christianity, and other questions about which his mind had been exercised, but that he had suffered much mental anxiety before he could arrive at that conclusion in consequence of his habit of requiring such convincing evidence of the point under consideration.

Through the teaching of the Holy Spirit the issue to him was a full conviction of the truths which he held and taught, but he admitted that it was dangerous to follow — a way in which the self-confidence of a man is more likely to be seen than the simple loving faith of a little child. Probably this explains how it was that in the earlier part of his ministry he did not receive the full assurance he desired, although he spent much time in prayer, and whole days in fasting and seeking direction from the Lord. This painful experience, however, was a grand preparation for his after work. The truths which he delivered were not his at second hand, but they had been wrought in him by the Spirit of God. By this process he also learned sympathy with the inward conflicts and mental doubts of those under his care. He preached as one who was intimately acquainted with the secret workings of his hearer's hearts; and in speaking to mourners in Zion he was peculiarly gentle and comforting.

His own heart was very tender, and when speaking of divine things his feelings frequently overpowered him. In reading the Scriptures, the tones of his voice were most impressive. One person who heard him read the inspired account of the Lord's Supper received therefrom her first right impressions of the nature and design of the ordinance. Once, when preaching about Caleb, the son of Jephunneh, his tone and manner in repeating the words of the Lord, "*He had another spirit with him, and hath followed me fully,*" gave to one of his hearers a life-long impression of the wisdom of following God, whatever the multitude might do. He wrote out his sermons, but he never read them from the pulpit, and he did not like to hear other ministers read their discourses. (NOTE: Too bad about Brother Shirreff. This part of his memoir strains credibility, and may explain why he died at age 69.) His ready-reference to Caleb as a man of God, and a person to emulate in all the vicissitudes of life, and who "*hath followed me fully,*" saith the Lord. (Num. 14:24.)

I say, the ready-reference of Shirreff to Caleb speaks worlds of holy credits and commendations to Shirreff. Caleb, as it were, vouches for Shirreff. You remember, Joshua and Caleb placed their lives in jeopardy when they were the only two — out of twelve — who brought back a good report of the land of Canaan after spending forty days spying out the land on orders from the Lord. The sad, sad story is told at Numbers, chapters 13 and 14; to wit:

“And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Send thou men, that they may search the land of Canaan, which I give unto the children of Israel: of every tribe of their fathers shall ye send a man, every one a ruler among them. And Moses by the commandment of the Lord sent them from the wilderness of Paran; all those men were heads of the children of Israel. And these were their names: of the tribe of Reuben, Shammua the son of Zaccur. Of the tribe of Simeon, Shaphat the son of Hori. Of the tribe of Judah, Caleb the son of Jephunneh. Of the tribe of Issachar, Igal the son of Joseph. Of the tribe of Ephraim, Oshea the son of Nun. Of the tribe of Benjamin, Palti the son of Raphu. Of the tribe of Zebulun, Gaddiel the son of Sodi. Of the tribe of Joseph, namely, of the tribe of Manasseh, Gaddi the son of Susi. Of the tribe of Dan, Ammiel the son of Gemalli. Of the tribe of Asher, Sethur the son of Michael. Of the tribe of Naphtali, Nahbi the son of Vophsi. Of the tribe of Gad, Geuel the son of Machi. These are the names of the men which Moses sent to spy out the land. And Moses called Oshea the son of Nun Jehoshua. And Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said unto them, Get you up this way southward, and go up into the mountain.”(Numbers 13:1-17.)

(Beloved, this matter of spying out the Promised Land, and thereby precipitating the wrath of God through violent unbelief by all but Caleb and Joshua — became a huge, huge deal. Ten of the twelve brought back a satanic slander upon the Promised Land. Only Caleb and Joshua were faithful.)

“And they returned from searching of the land after forty days. And they went and came to Moses, and to Aaron, and to all the congregation of the children of Israel, unto the wilderness of Paran, to Kadesh; and unto all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. And they told him, and said, We came unto the land whither thou sentest us, and surely it floweth with milk and honey; and this is the fruit of it. Nevertheless the people be strong that dwell in the land, and the cities are walled, and very great; and moreover we saw the children of Anak there. And Caleb stilled the people before Moses, and said, Let us go up at once, and possess

it; for we are well able to overcome it. But the men that went up with him said, We be not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we. And they brought up an EVIL REPORT OF THE LAND which they had searched unto the children of Israel, saying, The land, through which we have gone to search it, is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof; and all the people that we saw in it are men of a great stature. And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants; and we were in our sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.”(Num. 13:25-33)

Whereupon, Satanic, unbelieving cowardice took control of the chosen people of God, and doomed the children of Israel ! The Holy Spirit described the sad, sad situation, and in doing so struck fear in the breast of all God’s Elect, lest they also murmur and slander God’s Promised Land.

“And all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried; and the people wept that night. And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness! And wherefore hath the Lord brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? Were it not better for us to return into Egypt? And they said, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt. Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the children of Israel. And Joshua and Caleb which were of them that searched the land, rent their clothes; And they spake unto all the company, saying, The land, which we passed through to search, is an exceeding good land. If the Lord delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it us; a land which floweth with milk and honey. Only rebel not ye against the Lord, neither fear ye the people of the land; for they are bread for us; their defence is departed from them, and the Lord is with us; fear them not. But all the congregation bade stone them with stones. And the glory of the Lord appeared in the tabernacle of the congregation before all the children of Israel. And the Lord said unto Moses, How long will this people provoke me? And how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them? I will smite them with the pestilence, and disinherit them, and surely they shall not see the land which I swear unto their fathers, but my servant Caleb, because he had another spirit with him, and hath followed me fully, him will I bring into the land whereinto he went; and his seed shall possess it. But as for you, your carcasses, they shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years, and bear your whoredoms, until your carcasses be wasted in the wilderness. After the number of days in which ye searched the land, even forty days, each day for a year, shall ye bear your iniquities, even forty years, and ye shall know my breach of promise. I the Lord have said, I will surely do it unto all this evil congregation, that are gathered together against me; in this wilderness they shall be consumed, and there they shall die. And the men, which Moses sent to search the land, who returned, and made all the congregation to murmur against him, by bringing up a slander upon the land, Even those men that did bring up the evil report upon the land, died by the plague before the Lord. But Joshua and Caleb, which were of the men that went to search the land lived still. And Moses told these sayings unto all the children of Israel; and the people mourned greatly.”
(Num. 14:1-39)

I love you. Amen.