

“The Testimony of God” (An Exposition of 1 John 5:6-12)¹

Introduction

Our sermon text this morning in some ways is a difficult one, both because there is some question as to whether part of the text (v.7-8a in the KJV) is original to the letter as written by the Apostle John, as well as because the text itself (especially v.6-8) is simply difficult to interpret or understand.

Commentators have come up with various interpretations of v.6-8 regarding the meaning of the testimony of **“the Spirit and the water and the blood”** (v.7), which we will examine together shortly. And the vast majority of commentators in recent centuries have concluded that parts of v.7-8 (as found in the KJV) were not part of the original letter as penned by John.

As to the *textual question*, we will probably *not* be able to answer every question you may have this morning; time would not permit, and there is always the danger of *a sermon becoming a lecture*, which may be interesting or even edifying, but would be quite out of place in corporate worship.

And as to the *interpretive question*, I believe that we will find that whatever view one takes as the most likely meaning intended by John about the testimony to the truth of the Son of God, the basic point ends up being largely the same – that Jesus Christ is truly the Son of God incarnate and the Savior of the world.

And as to both the textual question and the interpretive question taken together, at the end of the day I think we will find that John's overall point remains clear – God has testified and continues to testify to us concerning His Son in the gospel, and we must receive the testimony of God regarding His Son by believing in Christ alone for salvation.

To refuse to believe God's testimony in favor of the testimony of men (such as the false teachers in John's day or in our own) is to make God Himself out to be a **“liar”** (v.10).

The Nature of the Testimony of God

The *first* thing we see in our text is *the nature of the testimony of God* – in other words, how has God testified to the truth of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ? That the testimony of God is the main theme or emphasis in our text is made abundantly clear just by the repetition of the word. Ian Hamilton points this out to us:

“Eight times in this section [v.6-12] John uses the words 'testifies', 'testify', and 'testimony'. It is as if we are in a courtroom and John is bringing forward witnesses to testify on Jesus' behalf, that he is the Christ, the Son of God.”²

What does John tell us about the nature of God's testimony? In v.6 we read:

“This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth”

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

² *The Letters of John* (Let's Study Series of Commentaries), p.75

When John says **“This is he”** (v.6) he is referring back to what he said in v.5: **“Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that *Jesus is the Son of God?*”** So far so good. But what does He mean by Jesus having come **“by water and blood”**?

Commentators are divided on this question. Some see it as a reference to the water and blood that flowed from Christ's pierced side when He died on the cross. In John 19:34–35 it is written:

“But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe.” (Italics added)

There is some logic to that view, and it doesn't hurt that John (also the author of 1 John) also uses the language of *bearing witness* and **“testimony”** there, just like in our text.

Some see it as a reference to *the Sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper* – the **“water”** referring to *baptism*, and the **“blood”** referring to the Cup of the Lord's Supper. There is some logic to that as well, as the sacraments are in some way intended as signs and seals of the covenant of grace, and are in that way a kind of testimony from God as well.

But these two views don't seem to make much sense out of John's statement that Jesus Christ **“came by water and blood.”** In what way could either of those things be understood as being the way that Christ came? The view that seems to make the most sense is that our Lord's coming **“by water and blood”** is to be understood as a reference to *His baptism* by John the Baptist (the water) and *His crucifixion* (blood). John Stott writes:

“We need therefore to find an interpretation of the phrase which makes *water and blood* both historical experiences ‘through’ which he passed and witnesses in some sense to his divine-human person. The . . . most satisfactory interpretation, first given by Tertullian, does this. It takes *water* as referring to the baptism of Jesus, at which he was declared the Son and commissioned and empowered for his work, and *blood* to his death, in which his work was finished.”³

Remember that the false teachers whom John was refuting in this epistle denied the incarnation of Christ. They denied that the Son of God really and truly took on flesh and became a man. The early Gnostics said that the Christ Spirit simply came upon the man Jesus at his baptism by John and then departed before the crucifixion.

John refutes this by saying that Jesus came by water and by blood – *fully affirming Christ's true humanity and His true divinity*. That is why John adds, **“not by the water only but by the water and the blood.”**

Now let us at least briefly address the textual question. You will notice that in the ESV v.7-8 are as follows: **“For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree.”** However, the King James Version says: **“For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.”**

³ *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 177–178.

As to the first part of v.7, the three heavenly witnesses, **“the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost”** – this is a clear statement of the doctrine of the Trinity, perhaps even the clearest in all of Scripture. It has been pointed out by a number of biblical scholars that these words (the disputed section of v.7-8) are only found in a very small handful of the Greek manuscripts of 1 John, and (as one writer notes) “None of these is earlier than the fourteenth century.”⁴ It was also not found in the earlier version of the Latin Vulgate.

This is why this section is either *not* found in more recent translations, or is included in brackets or in a footnote. However, everything in this section is *true and biblical* - especially the statement of the Trinity, as well as the fact that the Triune God bears witness to the truth of Christ and the gospel. *Indeed, the testimony of God to the truth of His Son is repeatedly emphasized throughout our text either way.* And so, while we may have questions as to whether or not this particular section truly belongs in the text, nothing is really affected as to the truth and overall point of the text either way.

The Necessity of Receiving the Testimony of God

We have seen *the nature of the testimony of God* – that He has borne witness to the truth of His Son, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; now let us briefly turn to what John tells us about *the necessity of receiving God's testimony concerning His Son*. In v.9–10 John writes:

“If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son.”

Here John is contrasting the testimony of God with that of the false teachers and anyone who would contradict the testimony of God. We do not know exactly what *bona fides* or supposed qualifications that the false teachers in John's day presented in order to gain an audience, but here John tells us that we must believe God rather than men.

In fact, to take the word of men over that of God is to make God a **“liar”** (v.10)! That is what we do whenever we give ear to false teaching. It is really not much different than Eve taking the word of the serpent over the Word of God in the garden.

And notice what John says in v.10 - **“Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself.”** This is most likely a reference to *the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit* within every believer.

No doubt the false teachers claimed some kind of secret, inner illumination or knowledge. And so John tells us that *if we are believers in Christ, we have the very testimony of God within us*, confirming the truth of the gospel of Christ as it is found in the Scriptures.

In some ways this has been John's theme in much of chapter 5 so far – the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of every believer. As John told us back in v.1, **“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God . . .”** The Holy Spirit brings us from spiritual death to life, and works faith in us at the hearing of the gospel of Christ. And so we have His testimony within us confirming the truth of Christ.

4 I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (NICNT), p.236, footnote 19

Do you receive the testimony of men over that of God? Or do you take God at His word? Psalm 12:6 tells us:

**“The words of the LORD are pure words,
like silver refined in a furnace on the ground,
purified seven times.”**

And Numbers 23:19 likewise says,

**“God is not man, that he should lie,
or a son of man, that he should change his mind.
Has he said, and will he not do it?
Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?”**

And as Paul tells us in Romans 3:4, **“Let God be true though every one were a liar”** Where God's Word speaks, and about whatever it speaks, it testifies truthfully – and we must receive the testimony of God or else we make Him out to be a liar.

The Summary Statement of the Testimony of God

Finally, we come to what we might consider *the summary statement or closing argument of the testimony of God*. In v.11–12 John tells us:

**“And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.
Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”**

Why does all of this matter? What is the point that John has been driving home all this time about the testimony of God? It is simply this: **“that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.”** (v.11)

God's testimony is not given for our curiosity or entertainment. It is not given in order that our heads might be puffed up with knowledge. It is given *so that sinners like us might be saved* and have eternal life by the grace and mercy of God!

You know the old saying about there being two kinds of people in this world? It is true in the most fundamental and important way imaginable. John spells it out for us, doesn't he? In v.12 he tells us, **“Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”**

That is it. You may have everything that the world has to offer – all the money, pleasure, fame, power, status, or whatever people chase after in this life – but if you do not have the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, you do not have the most important thing – *life*.

If you do not have Christ, you do *not* have *eternal life*. You are then still dead in your sins and abiding under the wrath of God.

But it does not have to be that way, because **“God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.”** (v.11) Do you believe in the Son of God? *Do you believe* in the One who **“came by water and blood”** (v.6), anointed by God as the Christ, who came to lay down His life as the atonement for the sins of His people? If so, then you have the testimony of God within you and you have eternal life.

Do you have the testimony of the Holy Spirit within you, testifying to the truth of Jesus Christ, so that you believe on Him for salvation? John tells us that **“the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.”** (v.6)

May we receive the testimony of God that He has borne concerning His Son – that Jesus Christ is the very Son of God and the only Savior of sinners – and by believing on Him, be assured that in Him we have eternal life, and all to the glory of God. - Amen