

The Testimony of God 1 John 5:5–12

“What happened?” the police officer might ask—lights spinning—as he comes upon the fender bender at Saddle Creek. “Who hit first?” the parent might ask—head spinning—as he or she comes upon two metaphorical fender benders in the hallway. Oftentimes, “he said, she said” makes these impossible judgment calls. Other times, however, an outsider saw the incident. Therefore, they can corroborate the testimony of one of the witnesses.

Hearing the same particulars of a story from multiple sources moves speculations toward facts. Corroboration makes the tale more believable, in fact. Back in October of 2009, four members from South Woods went on a mission trip to Central Asia. We bounced from city to city handing out copies of the Scriptures, sipping cay, and learning from workers in that region. Unfortunately, right before we were headed back to the airport to fly back, one of the guys noticed he’d left his ID at a previous stop. So, late at night, we drove back toward that location. It was late, and because the alleyways were too tight for a vehicle, we got as close as we could and two of the guys jumped out to go retrieve the ID. While they moved, quickly and quietly through these dark alleys, they looked over and saw the strangest thing. Two young boys were sitting beside a cat, and in this feline’s mouth was a lit cigarette. This was not necessarily something you see everyday.

I hope you don’t assume this, but if I’m just telling a tall—one, ask Pastor Phil later on about the Turkish alley cat. He was one of the guys fetching the ID. Or you could call our former beloved deacon Chuck, who moved to Atlanta a few years ago. He was with Pastor Phil. Or you could ask Jim if that’s the story those two guys were doubled—over laughing about when they made it back to the van.

We believe all kinds of things because multiple people attest to the truth of it. I wasn’t in Philly in 1776, but I’m fairly certain the United States was born then. I wasn’t here in 1987, but I’ve heard from reliable sources that’s when this church was started.

We believe human testimony, nearly every day. This is not a recent phenomenon, of course. John argues from the greater to the lesser in our text, pointing us to the testimony of God.

Last week’s text ended, “*This is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.*” This week’s text moves from the birth of our faith to the object of our faith, so we might be even more certain of it. John Stott summarizes our passage better than I could. He writes, “The way to life is faith, and the way to faith is testimony.”¹

1. Testimony makes faith plausible

In short, all faith is not created equal.

When I was in college, studying music, I took two semesters of Music History. My professor, probably the most winsome in the building, was educated at Yale, played in the Nashville Symphony, and gave some of the most entertaining lectures you could ever imagine on the history of music. He had students, including myself, eating out of his hand on a potentially boring topic.

If you study music history, however, you can’t evade religious realities. Bach and Psalm singing won’t allow it. Composers brought religious matters to the forefront regularly

¹ John Stott, *TNTC*, 184.

in this class, so one day my professor addressed it at my public university. He simply said, “I don’t care what you believe, but you better believe something.” The students continued to eat out of his hand.

But that’s faith in faith. John makes plain in our text the necessity of having faith in certain objective realities. v. 5 *Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?* The way the question is worded assumes that most don’t overcome the world.² However, while the world has a decent record, it’s not undefeated. The way to overcome the world and it’s passing desires is to believe something about Jesus, that is, He is the Son of God. John asks, “Is there another way to overcome other than faith in Christ?”

That question hangs over the next few verses. As John moves from regeneration and faith—our experience of conversion—to the person we put faith in, he writes v. 6 *This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood.*

A. The Testimony of Christ

By using, “this is he,” John makes plain he’s continuing to describe the object of overcoming faith. He is the Son of God in verse 5. In verse 6, He is the Christ, or Messiah, promised.

But he also notes here that the Son of God and the Christ *came by* something, that is, the water and the blood. Admittedly, by many commentators, this is interesting imagery. John doesn’t footnote or elaborate much upon the images, meaning the original audience must’ve immediately known what he was talking about.

However, since a couple thousand years and miles separate us from John’s audience, the particulars of that day, the interpretations have run the gamut. For example, biblical theologians have asserted that these are the ordinances, water referring to baptism and blood to the Lord’s Supper.³ However, while that might make sense with the way water and blood are used later in the passage, in verse 6 John asserts that Jesus Christ *came by*—past tense—water and the blood.⁴ The ordinances seem to be more present tense. And Jesus didn’t come by, or via, them.

As another example, Augustine thought this referred to the spear thrust while Jesus hung on the cross. As you recall, after He was pierced, water and blood flowed from His side. Again, what makes this interpretation less likely is “came by.” The water and blood came out of Him; He did not “come by” water and blood in that instance.

However, neither of these interpretations do heretical injustice to the text. But we should assume water and blood mean the same thing in verse 6 as they do in verses 7–8. In verse 6 it refers to a past event in the life of Christ. Verses 7-8 refer more to a present day testimony, which we’ll see in a moment. Therefore, John Stott concludes, “We need to find an interpretation of the phrase which makes water and blood both historical experiences . . . and witnesses in some sense to His divine human person.”⁵ So, as we’re putting this puzzle together, what does both?

2 Curtis Vaughan, *Founders Commentary*, 118.

3 Calvin and Luther, for example.

4 Vaughan, 119.

5 Stott, 178.

We have one more puzzle piece to incorporate, and that's the historical moment and what this church might have been facing. They clearly knew what John meant, so could there have been a false teaching on the water and the blood that was prevalent?

We're back with the incipient Gnostics, those who denied Jesus the Christ could've come in the flesh. In their mind, spiritual is spiritual; that which is physical cannot be spiritual. God couldn't become man, in that framework. One of the teachers we know propagated this notion at the time was a guy named Cerinthus. And here's one way he made his gnostic preference fit with the story of Jesus. He and his followers taught that the Spirit of God came upon Jesus at His baptism by John, but that the Spirit departed *before* the cross.⁶ Therefore, Jesus came as a man only. And died as a man only.⁷

So, consider the ramifications if Jesus died merely as a man? Could a man—even the best of men—satisfy the wrath of a holy God against sin?

Now that we've considered various interpretations, some grammar, and the historical background, let's read verse 6 again, *This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood.* John's emphasizing both/and. What's he alluding to? What seems to make the most sense is that the water is not our baptism, but Jesus' baptism by John. And the blood would then be the cross.⁸ That interpretation makes water and blood both a historical event in the life of Christ and continues to witness to His person. John is asserting that Jesus is God and the Christ both at His baptism—and in clear opposition to the heretics—He's the God-man at the cross. The gospel hinges upon that.

B. The Spirit's Testimony

John continues, essentially answering how he's come to this conclusion. v. 6b *And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.*

Nowhere in John's writings do witness or testimony language figure as prominently as in this section.⁹ (10 times in a few verses) In this case, it's not a police officer attempting to figure out who's to blame in an accident. Nor is it a parent or teacher sorting through 5th graders' tears. Or even a judge hearing evidence concerning a felony. This is sorting through the person of Jesus. Who is He? And what has He done?

John says the Spirit of God takes the stand.

Ok, but John, why should I listen to Him? The text continues, *because the Spirit is the truth.*

I read this week that one author—who might prefer a bit more relativism than any of us are ok with—put “ultimate truth” in the topic index of his book. He put three pages beside that topic. But, if you turned to those listed pages, each was blank.

John says the Spirit is the truth. This is the same John who recorded Jesus saying something similar, that is, *I am the truth* (Jn 14:6). Yet he also heard Jesus say a few moments later that after He went to prepare a place for them, He would send the Spirit of truth (14:17). He, the Spirit, would be the one to teach the disciples all things (14:26).

Those promises Jesus made, John must have experienced. Because he calls the Spirit the Spirit of truth. He brought to the disciples' remembrance everything Jesus—truth

6 Stott, 178.

7 Vaughan, 119.

8 Stott, Vaughan, Marshall, MacArthur, and Yarbrough all hold to this interpretation, as do most modern-day conservative scholars.

9 Robert Yarbrough, *BECNT*, 280

embodied—said to them (14:26). He—the Spirit—testified or bore witness to the person of Christ. So when John’s talking about Jesus being the Christ, the one who came by water and blood, it makes sense that he calls the Spirit to the stand. Because the Spirit is the one who opened his eyes to the truth.

This is what Pastor Phil covered last week in verse 1. *Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.* In regeneration, the Spirit makes belief possible. John Calvin would write, “Whatever signs of divine glory may shine forth in Christ, they would yet be obscure to us and escape our vision, were not the Holy Spirit to open for us the eyes of faith.”¹⁰ The Spirit makes faith possible. And the testimony John mentions here makes faith plausible. v. 7 *For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree.*

It’s entirely possible John has in mind the Mosaic instruction concerning corroborating evidence.¹¹ Long before 201 Poplar, multiple reputable sources were called in to settle a matter. For example, in Deuteronomy 19:15, *A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.*

So, if this connection is true, John takes something familiar to that audience—how they judged truth in other matters—and applies it to the person of Christ they believed in. There are more than three witnesses, of course, but he mentions three.

In verse 6, the emphasis of water and blood was on a historic event (Jesus *came by* water and blood). He was the Christ in both those settings. But that doesn’t exhaust—nor come close to exhausting—the applications of John’s baptism and the cross. John says here in verse 8 that the baptism and the cross continue to testify to this truth.¹² The water and the blood speak in the present.

The baptism of Jesus—including by every gospel writer—testifies to Jesus being the Son of God. He comes out of the water, the heavens open, and a voice from heaven (God the Father) said, *“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”* Few passages make so clear the assertion of verse 5 we began with, namely, that Jesus is God’s Son.

If baptism testifies to Jesus being God’s son, corroborating verse 5, the cross (blood) continues to testify to Jesus being the Christ of verse 6.

These are not merely past historical events, they continue to speak today. The water of His baptism testifies. The blood of the cross does as well. And the Spirit opens eyes to understand their significance. Further, these three witnesses don’t contradict each other. The message is one message. John would say, *and these three agree.*

And it’s not just any three.

C. The Testimony of God

John argues from the greater to the lesser. V. 9 *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.*

His point is, this past week we likely believed the testimony of men concerning what happened in the past. Whether that’s 1776 or at the park, we trust to some degree human answers to life’s events. They did in John’s day as well. And in Deuteronomy.

If you believe when they take the stand, what about when God does?

¹⁰ Quoted in Vaughan, 121.

¹¹ Ibid., 122.

¹² The verbs are in the present participle construction. See Yarbrough, 284

The *testimony of God* appears nowhere else in the New Testament.¹³ It refers to external, publicly manifested witness to a reality.¹⁴ What John's saying is that God took the stand by sending His Son. Stott writes, "It is God who bore witness to His Son in History, in the water and the blood, and it is God who bears witness to Him today through His Spirit in our hearts."¹⁵

At the baptism, God says, "This is my beloved Son." At the cross, God testifies to His person by raising Christ from the dead. The Spirit takes these realities and opens our eyes to the truth of them. This isn't, "I don't care what you believe, but you better believe in something." This is, "believe God."

This is the testimony of God. This testimony makes faith plausible.

Note second,

2. Faith makes life eternal

We know this, just because truths are plausible, juries are fallible. Perspectives are limited. And everyone doesn't believe those who testify to Christ's person. Even if it were God Himself.

Imagine if you were involved in that fender bender at Saddle Creek, but you were not at fault. However, the officer shows up in his or her Explorer, asks you what happened, and then charges you. What would you assume? He or she thinks I'm not telling the truth.

The second half of verse 10 describes this, *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.*

The verb here, "does not believe" is in the perfect tense.¹⁶ It's as if the witnesses have come forward, you've heard the testimony, deliberated, and concluded, "false."

John's not sugarcoating the reality. God has testified. If you don't believe what He's said, you're calling Him a liar. Few might call him that publicly for fear of the South's ostracism, but to not believe His word is to do so. *Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar.*

There's another response, however. Verse 10 already described the one who hears the testimony, whom the Spirit enlightened, and therefore he or she concluded, "this is true." *Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself.* The Scriptures' account of the Son of God is not like picking up Lewis or the latest David McCullough, this story works its way in a person, transforming them, keeping them, and comforting them.

John describes this inner testimony in v. 11, *And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.* It's not just that God testified via the water or the cross—though that is sufficient for our praise—it's that the God who cannot utter falsehood has declared life for us. This is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life.

Note a few things about this life. First, God gives it. It's not earned. We deserve a different wage.

Second, note that this life is present. The descriptor eternal often pushes us to think this to be merely a future reality. While it is not less than that, it's more. Eternal life is not

13 Yarbrough, 285.

14 Ibid., 286.

15 Stott, 181

16 Rogers and Rogers, *Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*, 599.

only about duration, or quantity, it's about quality. It is both already and not yet. For the redeemed, that which is to come has broken into the present. While we're not fully restored, if we have this life, we're more human than before. He came to give life abundant (John 10:10).

God gives it. It's present.

Third, note where life is found. In our text, John declares, life is in the Son (v. 11).

I so happened to be reading in Numbers this week. The Israelites become impatient yet again, speaking against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?" Shortly thereafter, fiery serpents began to bite the people and many of them died. But Moses prays for them and God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, (on their way to death) when they look at it, shall live (Numbers 21:9).

We know that story. John heard Jesus tell it, and then use it as an analogy in John 3, "*As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life*" (Jn 3:14–15). Those on their way to death, look and live.

1 John 1:2 asserted that the Son *is* life. In John 17, Jesus says that for those whom God gave Him out of the world, He would be *in them* (17:26). Of that passage, Jordan Thomas wrote, "As the climactic crescendo of His most magnificent prayer, Jesus shares with us His most magnificent gift. Himself." In short, if He is life, and we have Him, we have life.

Which is precisely what v. 12 states, *Whoever has the Son has life*. This is life eternal—fellowship with God—begun in the now.

And yet, the converse is true. Verse 12 continues, *whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life*. It must be stated—clearly—that those who do not believe God's testimony about His Son do not have this life God offers. Know this: you can breathe, and yet be dead (Eph 2).

Hear the invitation of the gospel: believe and live.

As John Stott wrote, "The way to life is faith, and the way to faith is testimony." God gives us His testimony—objective, faithful, trustworthy—so we might believe, and therefore, enjoy life with Him.