

An Expository Study of 1 John
Part 9 (of 10 parts):

An Exposition of 1 John 5:1-12

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Beginning with 1 John 4:7 John launched into a discussion of the centrality of love in the Christian life as a ground for Christian assurance. In 4:7-16a he dealt with the nature of redeeming love, and in 4:16b-21 he presented the results of this love in human experience. The first five verses of chapter 5 are related to the concluding verses of chapter 4, for they draw out the relationship between true love for God and love for God's children. The presence and power of redeeming love assure the believer of his saving relationship with God.

Redeeming Love in the Believer's Relationship to God

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God; and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. And who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5:1-5).

In these verses John showed that the varied relationships of love are all related to God in the Christian life. He stated the relationship between saving faith and the experience of love (v. 1), he noted that love is revealed in obedience to God's commandments (vv. 2-3), and he portrayed the power of saving faith in a life of victory over the world (vv. 4-5).

THE REVELATION OF LOVE IN SAVING FAITH (v. 1)

John's assertion, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God," declares the content and result of Christian faith. The designation, "Whoever believes" (πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων, literally, "everyone believing"), is personal but includes every individual thus characterized; it stresses the universal scope of the fact presented. The present participle denotes that the individual exercises a persistent, continuous faith. The verb, a favorite term with John,¹ means more than intellectual apprehension of a truth or assent to a creed; it involves an active personal committal to the truth believed. Smalley notes that "such (orthodox) faith is virtually synonymous with the 'confession' or 'acknowledgment' demanded of the true believer according to 2:22-23; 4:2, 15."² It is a faith that intellectually accepts and actively commits itself to the fact "that Jesus is the Christ" (ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ Χριστός). The name "Jesus" involves acknowledgment of His true humanity, a fact denied by Docetic Gnosticism, while "the Christ" refers to Him as "the anointed One," the Messiah whose coming was announced in the Old Testament.

Repeatedly John had said that "Jesus" is indeed "the Son of God" (1:7; 3:8, 23; 4:9, 15). The present tense "is" declares that His incarnate identity is a continuing, unchanging reality. Acceptance of Jesus as "the Christ" involves acceptance of all His functions as the incarnate Christ. It is a faith that accepts the redemptive message of the Old and New Testaments. John stressed that salvation is not merely for an elite few believers but is for all who will personally accept the apostolic message "that Jesus is the Christ." Everyone who commits himself to this Savior "is born of God" (ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται, literally, "out of God has been born") The emphatic "out of God" stresses the source of the believer's birth; the perfect tense looks back to when God implanted new life in the believer and portrays his continuing possession of that new life as a member of God's family. John declared the reality of the believer's new birth, but, as Westcott observes, "nothing is said of the relation between the human and the Divine—the faith of man, and 'the seed of God' (iii. 9)—in the first quickening of life."³

¹ The verb "believe" in its varied forms occurs 98 times in the Fourth Gospel; it has already been used three times before (3:23; 4:1, 16) in 1 John and occurs five times in 5:1-10. The noun "faith" (πίστις) occurs only in 5:4 in John's epistles, and does not occur in the Fourth Gospel.

² Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 51 (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), p. 266.

³ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St John*, 3d ed. (1892; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), pp. 176-77.

John's connective "and" (καὶ) inseparably joins this saving faith with a loving relationship to the Father and His children: "and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him." The use of "whoever" (πᾶς ὅς) again makes this assertion personal but inclusive of all those so characterized, while the articular participle rendered "loves" (ὁ ἀγαπῶν) pictures the individual as marked by a continuing love for "the Father" (τὸν γεννήσαντα), the One who as a definite act begat him and so made him His child.

Since the Father is characterized as a God of love, the child born of Him is also marked by an attitude of love. His love for the Father naturally means that he is to "love the child born of Him" (ἀγαπᾷ τὸν γεγεννημένον ἐξ αὐτοῦ, "loves the one having been begotten of Him"). John's use of the singular throughout the verse indicates that this God-prompted love operates on an individual basis, not merely in a group relationship. Each member of the family of God is born not only to love but also to be loved. This family love is the outward manifestation that new life has been imparted. "This love," Hodges remarks, "does not spring from something loveable in the person himself, but from his paternity."⁴ It does not necessarily express itself as a warm emotional reaction toward the one loved, nor does it always run with the natural inclinations of one's individual nature, but it does seek the true welfare of the one loved. It reveals itself in its beneficence toward others.

THE REVELATION OF LOVE IN OBEDIENCE TO GOD (vv. 2-3)

In verse 2 John insisted that true love operates in two directions: "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments." In 4:20-21 he insisted that true love for God also involves love of one's brother in Christ. Now John stressed the converse truth; every instance of love and obedience to God is assurance that one loves His children. Unfortunately at times the tense relations between believers raise the question whether they truly love each other. John now pointed out reassuring evidence that true believers do "love the children of God." Because of the very nature of Christian love, believers have evidence of love for God's children "when we love God and observe His commandments." The temporal particle "when" (ὅταν, better, "whenever") points to the repeated occasions when they are aware that they do indeed "love God and observe His commandments" (τὸν θεὸν ἀγαπῶμεν καὶ τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ ποιῶμεν). These two present tense verbs⁵ are

⁴ Zane C. Hodges, "1 John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), p. 901.

⁵ The use of the subjunctive mode with the indefinite temporal particle indicates

contemporaneous with the preceding verb "we know" (*γινώσκουμεν*); the conscious experiences of a person's love for God offer assurance that he does love His children. A Christian in fellowship with the Father naturally loves His children. As Plummer remarks, "Love to God and love to the brethren confirm and prove each other. If either is found alone it is not genuine. Fellowship with God and fellowship one with another (i. 3, 7) necessarily exist together."⁶

The nature of love for God is given a double statement: it consists in love for Him and obedience to His commandments. A Christian shows his love for God in each conscious effort to do His known will. The plural "His commandments" suggests that God has given various statements of His will for His people which relate to various aspects of Christian living. The present tense verb "observe" (*ποιῶμεν*) denotes the repeated occasions when they deliberately act to do God's will. Elsewhere in this epistle John used the verb "keep" (*τηρέω*) in connection with "the commandments" (2:3, 4; 3:22, 24; 5:3), suggesting the exercise of diligent care to carry out what God enjoined. The Greek manuscripts are divided in their use of the verb here.⁷

The opening "For" (*γάρ*) of verse 3 introduces a further comment on the last clause of verse 2: "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments." "This" (*αὕτη*) looks forward to the following "that" clause, which gives a pithy definition of "the love of God" (*ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ*). The definite article "the" "indicates that John has in mind the particular selfless love that has been under discussion throughout the epistle."⁸ The genitive "of God" is clearly objective, denoting one's love for God as revealed in the fact "that we keep His commandments" (*ἵνα τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ τηρῶμεν*⁹). As Stott remarks, "Love for God is not an emotional experience so much as moral obedience."¹⁰

The added words, "and His commandments are not burdensome," explain the impact of these commandments in the experience of the

that the time of these experiences is indefinite; they do not occur according to a prearranged time schedule.

⁶ A. Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (1883; reprint, Cambridge: University Press, 1938), p. 156.

⁷ For the textual evidence see United Bible Societies, *The Greek New Testament*, 3d ed. (New York: American Bible Society, 1975). On a scale of A to D the editors rate the reading (*ποιῶμεν*) as C. It is probable that this unusual term was changed in some manuscripts to harmonize with John's usage elsewhere in the epistle.

⁸ Donald W. Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle: An In-Depth Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), p. 345.

⁹ The subjunctive mode of the verb is due to the *ἵνα* construction.

¹⁰ John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 173.

believer. Love-prompted obedience is not a crushing burden that exhausts the believer's strength and destroys his sense of freedom in Christ. He finds that the new life in Christ makes obedience possible and has implanted in him a desire to do the will of God; for he realizes that God has given His laws for the believer's own protection and highest welfare. He finds in them guidance concerning "what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2). For him "the statutes again become songs, and the commandments prove to be the stepping-stones to freedom."¹¹ As Dodd points out, John "does not mean that God's demands upon us are less exacting than we supposed, but that they are accompanied by the assurance of power to fulfil them."¹² God's commandments become burdensome whenever a Christian desires to do something inconsistent with His directives; when a believer attempts to carry out his own will, God's commandments seem cruel and restrictive and fellowship with God is broken. Then he finds that he must come back to a loving obedience.

THE REVELATION OF LOVE IN OVERCOMING FAITH (vv. 4-5)

That God's commandments are not burdensome is because of the faith-inspired victory that the new birth brings into one's life: "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world." The neuter "whatever" (πᾶν τὸ) presents the victory impersonally, stressing not "the victorious person" but rather "the victorious power."¹³ And the perfect passive articular participle (τὸ γεγεννημένον), "that which has been begotten") presents this power as the abiding result of the new birth. The passive turns the attention from the believer himself to the God who wrought the new birth in him. This God-implanted power is the true dynamic that "overcomes the world" (νικᾷ τὸν κόσμον). The present tense verb presents this victory as a continuing experience gained through continuing struggle against "the world." The term "gathers up the sum of all the limited, transitory powers opposed to God which make obedience difficult"¹⁴ for the believer. The new birth enables him to recognize the evil nature of the world and "all that is in the world" (2:16) and to reject its allurements. Included in this victory was the successful struggle of the believers against the heretics that had arisen in their midst (2:18-29).

¹¹ R. E. O. White, *Open Letter to Evangelicals: A Devotional and Homiletic Commentary on the First Epistle of John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 126.

¹² C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, The Moffatt New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper & Row, 1946), p. 126.

¹³ Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, p. 157 (italics his).

¹⁴ Westcott, *The Epistles of St John*, p. 179.

John identified this victorious power: "and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" (5:4b). The demonstrative pronoun "this" (αὕτη) looks forward to the appositional designation "our faith," placed emphatically at the end of the statement. The noun "the victory" (ἡ νίκη) occurs only here in the New Testament, but the term was common in the contemporary Greek world. John's expression, "the victory that has overcome" (ἡ νίκη ἡ νικήσασα, literally, "the victory, the one which overcame") indicates that this victory has the character of a specific, decisive conquest. The articular aorist participle, appositionally describing "the victory," points to some specific victory gained in the past.

The nature of this victory has been differently understood. Some take it as a reference to Christ's once-for-all victory over Satan (John 12:31-32; 14:30) and the world (16:33) through His work on the cross. Then the believer's victory is gained by appropriating the victory already won by Christ. Thus Marshall remarks, "To believe that Jesus has been victorious is to have the power that enables us also to win the battle, for we know that our foe is already defeated and therefore powerless."¹⁵ Others insist that the victory in view here is not Christ's victory but the believer's victory, since John described it as "our faith" (ἡ πίστις ἡμῶν).¹⁶ If "our" refers to believers, the victory in view would be gained over the heretics, causing them to withdraw (1 John 2:18-19). More natural is a reference to the conversion of the individual believer, his confession of faith in Jesus as the Son of God being seen as "part of the assault which inflicts defeat on the world."¹⁷ Clearly the picture is of the believer exercising aggressive, personal faith in overcoming the world. But since John at once pointed out that the one who thus overcomes the world has placed his faith in "Jesus" as "the Son of God" (5:5), he made it clear that the believer's victorious faith derives its true power from his union with the victorious Christ. Each victory gained by the believer over his old self, the world, and Satan is realized through an appropriation of the power of Christ.

In verse 5 John's question turns from the principle of victory to the victorious individual: "And who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" The interrogative "who" (τίς) asks for the personal identification of the one

¹⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), p. 229.

¹⁶ So Burdick, *The Epistles of John the Apostle*, pp. 346-47; Kenneth Grayston, *The Johannine Epistles*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), p. 134.

¹⁷ Grayston, *The Johannine Epistles*, p. 134.

characterized as overcoming the world. Instead of leaving it as an independent question (as in the NIV rendering), John continued with a suggested answer: "but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (εἰ μὴ ὁ πιστεύων ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, more literally, "if not the one believing that Jesus is the Son of God"). The implication is that if the one so described is not victorious over the world, then no one is. John closely combined the victory of the believer with what he believes. No one who denies the apostolic teaching that "Jesus is the Son of God" can claim true victory over the world, which is characterized by its rejection of the Son of God (John 1:10-11). To deny that Jesus is the Son of God is to deny the fact of the Incarnation. This article of faith underlies all the other parts of the Christian message; to destroy this truth is to destroy the whole gospel and effectively to nullify God's provision for victory over sin and the world. Acceptance of the apostolic message that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (20:31) gives the believer personal assurance and sure victory in his conflict with the forces of evil.

Assurance from the Witness of the Spirit

This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that bear witness, the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater; for the witness of God is this, that He has borne witness concerning His Son. The one who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the witness that God has borne concerning His Son. And the witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life (1 John 5:6-12).

In verses 6-12 John spoke of another basis for Christian assurance, namely, the witness of the Holy Spirit. In this section the controlling factor is the term "witness," which in its varied forms as a noun or verb occurs nine times in these verses. Faith in Jesus Christ is based on valid testimony. In verses 6-9 John pointed to the historical witnesses to Jesus Christ, and in verses 10-12 he dealt with the human responses to the divine witness and their divergent results.

THE HISTORICAL WITNESSES TO JESUS CHRIST (vv. 6-9)

John called attention to two historical facts that bear witness to Christ (v. 6), he indicated that the Spirit, as a witness, is the truth (v. 7), he declared the agreement of these witnesses to Christ (v. 8), and he insisted on the trustworthiness of the divine witness (v. 9).

The historical facts connected with Christ's coming (v. 6). Con-

cerning "Jesus . . . the Son of God" (v. 5), John now asserted, "This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ." The demonstrative pronoun "this" (οὗτός) refers back to the designation "Jesus . . . the Son of God" in verse 5, while the appositional identification, "Jesus Christ" (v. 6), establishes His historical identity as Jesus of Nazareth who also is the Messiah. The expression "the one who came" (ὁ ἐλθὼν) suggests the familiar messianic title "the coming One" (ὁ ἐρχόμενος). The aorist participle portrays His coming as a past historical reality; this assures that the words "by water and blood" (δι' ὕδατος καὶ αἵματος) also point to historical realities. The coming in view here is not His condescension to the earth but is His public appearing as the promised Messiah. The terms "water and blood" serve somehow to depict His messianic office. The usage of the terms is obscure to the modern reader, but obviously their intended significance was familiar to John's readers, and apparently had arisen out of the theological controversy with the heretical teachers (2:18-19). Varied interpretations have been advanced.

The oldest and most natural view understands "water" as a reference to Christ's baptism with the attendant witnesses to His identity at the commencement of His public ministry, and "blood" to the termination of His ministry on the cross. The two terms serve to sum up Christ's work of redemption. As Plummer notes,

Christ's Baptism, with the Divine proclamation of Him as Son of God and the Divine outpouring of the Spirit upon Him, is not merely the opening but the explanation of the whole of His Ministry. The bloody death upon the Cross is not merely the close but the explanation of His Passion.¹⁸

A second view, adopted by Augustine (354-430)¹⁹ and some other early interpreters, linked the "water and blood" with the "blood and water" that issued from His spear-pierced side on the cross (John 19:34-35). Though it has received some modern support,²⁰ this view is scarcely tenable. The reverse order of the two terms is against it. The point of the two references is very different: here the terms are used to support the reality of the historical ministry of the incarnate Son of God; in John's account of the crucifixion the mention of "blood and water" serves to establish the reality of His physical death. Nor does this view explain John's added words, "not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood."

¹⁸ Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, p. 158.

¹⁹ The dates are those given in J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), p. 86.

²⁰ So W. Alexander, "The First Epistle General of John," in *The Speaker's Commentary, New Testament* (London: John Murray, 1881), 4:341-42, 348-50; F. W. Farrar, *The Early Days of Christianity* (New York: Cassell, n.d.), pp. 564-66.

A third view, going back to the time of the Reformers, sees in the two terms a reference to Christian baptism (water) and the Lord's Supper (blood). This view encounters the problem of the aorist tense of the term rendered "came" as denoting a past historical event, while Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper are recurring observances that relate to the ongoing life of the church. Further, the simple word "blood" is a strange and unprecedented symbol for the Lord's Supper.

The view that "water and blood" are shorthand references to the inauguration and consummation of the public ministry of the incarnate Christ is in accord with John's added assertion, "not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood" (v. 6b). John insisted that the realities denoted by "water and blood" cannot be separated in dealing with the coming and work of Jesus Christ. Clearly John was countering the heretical views of the false teachers. His refusal to separate the two realities of Christ's baptism and crucifixion may well be a denial of two kinds of incipient Gnosticism. Docetic Gnosticism denied that Jesus Christ really had a human body; He only appeared to be a real man. This was a blatant denial of the reality of the Incarnation; since He did not have a real body, He could not be viewed as having experienced the physical sufferings of the crucifixion. It was also a denial of the heretical views of Cerenthus, a late contemporary of the Apostle John at Ephesus,²¹ Cerenthus separated the man Jesus from the spiritual Christ. He regarded Jesus as a mere man, the son of Joseph and Mary; he taught that the divine Christ came on the man Jesus at His baptism, empowered His ministry, but left Him before His crucifixion. The man Jesus suffered and rose again, but the divine Christ remained impassible. John denied all such attempts to sever the divine-human nature of the incarnate Christ, Jesus the Son of God.

John's change in the preposition used in the two parts of verse 6 has evoked considerable discussion. He first spoke of Christ coming "by [δι'] water and blood" and then as coming "not with [ἐν] the water only, but with [ἐν] the water and with [ἐν] the blood." (The use of the definite articles in the second part simply points back to the "water and blood" just mentioned). Some interpreters hold that both prepositions here have the force of "by" or "through" and that the change is simply "for the sake of literary variety."²² Others, like Lenski, hold that some change in the picture is present.

The mission on which God sent his Son and in which he came as "Savior of the world" (4:14) made him use these two means (διό), water and

²¹ Irenaeus *Heresies* 3. 3. 4.

²² Burdick, *The Epistles of John the Apostle*, pp. 367-68.

blood; when he came, it was not "in connection with" water alone (as the heretics claimed) but "in connection with the water and in connection with the blood." ... The *διὰ* states what the connection indicated by *ἐν* was: it was the connection of means.²³

Plummer noted that this use of "with," literally "in," denoting the element or sphere in which a thing is done may be due to the Septuagint rendering in Leviticus 16:3: "Thus Aaron shall enter into the holy place in a calf of the herd" (*ἐν μάσχω ἐκ βοῶν*), that is, "with a calf."²⁴ Whatever distinctions may be intended by the two prepositions, both refer to the same historical events.

The witness of the Spirit (v. 7).²⁵ Beside the two historical events that bear witness to Jesus as Messiah, John further pointed to the witness of the Holy Spirit:²⁶ "And it is the Spirit who bears witness" (*καὶ τὸ πνεῦμά ἐστιν τὸ μαρτυροῦν*, "and the Spirit is the One bearing witness"). The Spirit is now described by His activity as the Witness-bearer. The present tense participle²⁷ indicates that "His testimony is given now and uninterruptedly."²⁸ Without His testimony the true significance of the "water and blood" remain unintelligible to the natural human heart. In verse 6 the aorist tense marked that Jesus Christ came once for all to carry out His redemptive mission; but the Spirit is ever at work interpreting and applying the significance of Christ's mission to human hearts. The Book of Acts is essentially a record of the witness of the Spirit through God's people and the Scriptures. He still continues to bear witness "in the believer's heart and in the believing community; their experience of His power and guidance confirms the truth of the gospel to which they have committed themselves."²⁹

²³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1966), pp. 525-26. See also Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, p. 232, n. 6.

²⁴ Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, p. 159.

²⁵ When the English Revised Version (1881) dropped the spurious passage concerning the three heavenly witnesses, the verse numbering was moved back to give a more balanced verse division. This numbering was also used in the ASV (1901), the NASB, and the RSV. The NEB, Jerusalem Bible, and NIV more nearly adhere to the old KJV verse numbering.

²⁶ Henry Alford mentions five views concerning the meaning of "Spirit" here, all of which he rightly rejects as contrary to the context (*The New Testament for English Readers* [reprint, Chicago: Moody Press, n.d.], pp. 1744-50).

²⁷ The neuter form of the participle is due to the neuter gender of the Greek word for Spirit, *πνεῦμα*.

²⁸ Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, p. 183.

²⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1970), p. 119.

The agreement of the three witnesses (v. 8). John spoke of three witnesses: "For there are three that bear witness" (ὅτι τρεῖς εἰσιν οἱ μαρτυροῦντες).³⁰ The exact force of the opening "for" (ὅτι) is not obvious. After noting varied suggestions, Burdick concludes, "It is certain that the conjunction is loosely used to introduce the noteworthy fact that there are three witnesses, but to attempt to penetrate John's exact train of thought any further is mere guesswork."³¹ Smalley renders, "indeed, there are three witnesses."³² The number "three" stresses that the number of witnesses assures that their testimony is reliable and authentic (cf. Deut. 19:15). The present tense participle pictures them as living personal witnesses; John named them as being "the Spirit and the water and the blood" (τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ καὶ τὸ αἷμα).³³ Though the three have already been mentioned, John now drew them together and named the Spirit first. As Alford notes,

The Spirit is, of the three, the only living and active witness, properly speaking: besides, the water and the blood are no witnesses without Him, whereas He is independent of them, testifying both in them and out of them.³⁴

Yet John is fully justified in citing "the water and the blood" as witnesses to Jesus Christ. Inanimate objects can bear a strong witness when their history is known and understood. In John 5:36 Jesus declared that His own works bear witness to Him; in Hebrews 11:4 the author asserted that the faith-prompted sacrifice of Abel still speaks; in Genesis 31:48 a heap of stones put up by Jacob and Laban is

³⁰ The Textus Receptus, represented in the King James Version, here adds the so-called *Comma Johanneum*, which reads as follows: "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." The italics mark the words for which there is no valid authority in the Greek manuscripts. They are absent from all Greek uncial manuscripts; four late cursive manuscripts have them where they appear to be a translation from the Latin Vulgate. No version of the first four centuries gives them; none of the Greek church fathers quoted the words in their controversies concerning the Trinity. Research has shown that the words originated as a gloss on John's text in Latin that later was included as part of the text. The internal evidence is also decidedly against their authenticity. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), pp. 716-18.

³¹ Burdick, *The Epistles of John the Apostle*, pp. 369-70.

³² Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 281.

³³ These three Greek nouns are all in the neuter gender, yet the preceding numeral and participle are masculine gender, constituting "a testimony, the more striking because involuntary, to the personality of the Spirit" (David Smith, "The Epistles of St. John," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament* [reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., n.d.], 5:195).

³⁴ Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers*, p. 1750.

called a "witness" (also see Josh. 22:10, 27; 24:27).

The witness of "the water and the blood" in verse 8 has been understood in two different ways. One view is that while in verse 6 they are historical, bearing witness to Christ's baptism and crucifixion, in verse 8 they refer to the Christian ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper.³⁵ It is held that the present tense "bear witness" cannot refer to the past life and death of Jesus but must refer to the repeated sacramental testimony in the Christian church. But such a proposed change of the meaning of "the water and the blood" here "is rather arbitrary since there is nothing in the context that indicates that John has changed the meaning of the two terms."³⁶ It is preferable to hold that the two terms have the same meaning in both verses.³⁷ The present tense points to the fact that the water and the blood continue to bear witness whenever the historical records of Christ's baptism and death are read or proclaimed.

John added the further fact that "the three are in agreement" (καὶ οἱ τρεῖς εἰς τὸ ἓν εἰσιν, "the three are [witnesses] unto one thing"). All three agree in proclaiming the truth concerning Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This witness is in striking contrast to that of the false witnesses at the trial of Jesus who could not agree in establishing a valid charge against Jesus (Matt. 26:59-61; Mark 14:55-59).

The trustworthiness of the divine witness (v. 9). John used a conditional sentence to present the trustworthiness of this witness: "If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater." John's "if" implies no doubt and is an argument from the lesser to the greater. If a person did not believe the testimony of those around him in everyday life, he simply could not get along. People receive the testimony of others as reliable unless they have reason to doubt their honesty. John implied that there is no reason to doubt God's witness because it "is greater" (μείζων ἐστίν), is more reliable and trustworthy. The unbeliever is less reasonable with God than he is with men. The threefold witness of verse 8 is, really "the witness of God" because He is behind it all.

The divine witness is "that He has borne witness concerning His Son" (ὅτι μεμαρτύρηκεν περὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ). The force of the conjunction (ὅτι) may be understood in different ways. It can be taken (a) as a relative conjunction (ὃ τί, "that which, whatever") as simply recording the fact that God has given testimony concerning His Son, without indicating its contents; (b) as causal, "because He has wit-

³⁵ So Rudolf Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles*, Herrnenia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), pp. 80-81; Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, pp. 130-31.

³⁶ Burdick, *The Epistles of John the Apostle*, p. 370.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 370-71; and Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, pp. 281-82.

nessed concerning His Son"; or (c) as declarative, the witness is "that He has indeed borne witness concerning His Son." The third view seems the most probable.

John declared that God has placed Himself permanently on record (perfect tense) as having borne witness to His Son. He did so prophetically in the Old Testament. He did so explicitly on at least three occasions as recorded in the Gospels—at His baptism (Matt. 3:16-17; Mark 1:10-11), at His transfiguration (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35); in the hearing of the multitude during Passion Week (John 12:27-29)—as well as nonverbally in the miracles at His crucifixion, as well as at the resurrection. According to Hebrews 1:1-2 the Son Himself was the embodiment of God's highest and final self-revelation to mankind.

THE EFFICACY OF THE DIVINE WITNESS (vv. 10-12)

John now turned to the impact of this divine witness on mankind. In verse 10 he set forth the contrasted result of men's response to the witness, and in verses 11-12 he declared the relationship of the Son to the possession of eternal life.

The responses to God's witness (v. 10). Individuals respond either positively or negatively to God's witness. The results are crucial. Positively, "The one who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself." The articular participle, "the one who believes" (ὁ πιστεύων) portrays the individual as exercising a continuing faith centered on the Son of God. The verb "believe," occurring thrice in this verse, embodies the essence of man's response to God's witness. It involves not merely an acceptance of the truthfulness of the message but also a personal trust in or committal to the One to whom witness is borne. The expression "believes in the Son" (πιστεύων εἰς τὸν υἱὸν) pictures faith as moving toward and resting on the Son.³⁸ Such a personal committal to the incarnate Son of God is central to the Christian faith. A result of such faith is that the believer "has the witness in himself" (ἔχει τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἐν αὐτῷ); he possesses it as an inner reality. The content of the witness is the reality witnessed to by "the Spirit and the water and the blood" (v. 8) and confirmed by God's witness to His Son (v. 9). The indwelling Spirit makes this witness a vital inner reality for the believer. The expression "in himself" (ἐν αὐτῷ)³⁹ indicates that this

³⁸ This is the first occurrence of "believe" with εἰς ("into") in 1 John; it occurs 34 times in the Fourth Gospel and only 10 times in the rest of the New Testament.

³⁹ The manuscripts are divided between αὐτῷ and the reflexive ἑαυτῷ. For the evidence see Nestle and Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*. In the 22d ed. (American Bible Society, 1956) they used αὐτῷ in the 26th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1979) they used ἑαυτῷ. Whatever the form, the meaning is clearly reflexive.

message "which for others is external is for the believer experiential ... an inner conviction of life and cleansing and redemption."⁴⁰

Negatively, "the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar." The construction, "the one who does not believe" (ὁ μὴ πιστεύων), again describes the individual by his characteristic refusal to trust God enough to accept the testimony He has given. This refusal means he has no personal relationship with God. Indeed he "has made Him a liar" (ψεύστην πεποίηκεν αὐτόν). His unbelief is an attack on the very character of God. "Unbelief," Stott remarks, "is not a misfortune to be pitied; it is a sin to be deplored."⁴¹

John underlined the nature of the individual's unbelief, "because he has not believed in the witness that God has borne concerning His Son." The perfect tense verb "he has not believed" (οὐ πεπίστευκεν) marks his state as a confirmed unbeliever. He has placed himself on record as not accepting God's witness concerning His Son.

The witness concerning God's gift (vv. 11-12). John's "and" (καὶ), again links his further assertion with the preceding discussion. The demonstrative pronoun "this" in the words "and the witness is this" (καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ μαρτυρία), stands emphatically forward and looks to the following "that" clause which unfolds the content of the witness, namely, "that God has given us eternal life" (ὅτι ζωὴν αἰώνιον ἔδωκεν ἡμῖν ὁ θεός). When the external witness is internally appropriated, it bears witness to the fact that God has imparted "eternal life." The forward position of the words "eternal life" marks this life as the key concept in these verses. Used without an article, the term is qualitative; "it is the highest kind of spiritual and moral life, irrespective of time, which God enables the believer to share in relationship with Jesus."⁴² While this life continues on in the timeless ages of eternity, God has already "given" (ἔδωκεν) this gift to the believer as a present possession. The aorist verb "given" naturally looks back to the reception of this life at the time of one's new birth. With "us" John again included himself among those possessing this precious gift.

Grammatically, the further assertion, "and this life is in His Son" (καὶ αὕτη ἡ ζωὴ ἐν τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ ἐστὶν), may be taken as "a new independent statement, coordinated with the first clause."⁴³ So understood it is John's own explanation concerning God's gift of eternal life to us. Others hold that this clause is still part of God's wit-

⁴⁰ Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, p. 186.

⁴¹ Stott, *The Epistles of John*, p. 182.

⁴² Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 287.

⁴³ Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, p. 163.

ness, that "God's 'testimony' relates not only to his bestowal of life, but also to the fact that the sole medium of its bestowal is to be found in Jesus."⁴⁴ This view enriches the content of the message and underlines the importance of adhering to the apostolic message concerning the incarnate Son. Our relationship with the Son is crucial. As Boice points out, "It is as impossible to have life without having Christ as it is impossible to have Christ without at the same time possessing eternal life."⁴⁵ To be united with the incarnate Son of God is to be united with the Father who sent Him (Rom. 6:23; 2 Tim. 1:1).

The positive and negative statements in verse 12 stress that eternal life is inseparably related to God's Son and personally obtained only in union with Him. Positively, "he who has the Son has the life." The present tenses mark this possession of life as a present reality. It is only through this close and living union between Christ and the believer that eternal life can be experienced. Smalley notes that this possession of life in Christ involves a reciprocal relationship: "we have life 'in' Jesus (v. 11); but, when this is appropriated, God through Christ lives 'in' the believer (cf. 3:24; also 2:24, 27, 28; 3:6, 9; 4:12, 13, 15, 16)."⁴⁶

Negatively, "he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life." The full title "the Son of God" spells out the true identity of the One whom the unbeliever is spurning. In the preceding statement John placed the articular designation "the life" after the verb; now "the life" is placed emphatically before the verb, indicating that this life is beyond the grasp of the one "who does not have the Son." Apart from the Son he is spiritually dead. Personal repentance and true submission to and acceptance of Jesus Christ as the Son of God is the only hope for attaining "the life" that is life indeed.

⁴⁴ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 287.

⁴⁵ James, Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), p. 166.

⁴⁶ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 288.

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