



THAT YOU MAY KNOW: A STUDY OF FIRST JOHN

LESSON 16: “Assurance and the Reception of God’s Word”

TEXT: 1 John 5:6–12

The next section in our study, 1 John 5:6–12, presents several challenges. First, it contains one of the most well-known textual variants in the New Testament. According to the King James Version (KJV), 1 John 5:7–8 reads, “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.” But these verses in the New American Standard Bible (NASB) read as follows: “For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.” Other standard English versions read similarly to the NASB.

Known as the *Johannine Comma*, the additional language found in the KJV is nearly universally recognized as a much later scribal addition—not the language originally written by the apostle John himself. The earliest Greek manuscript to contain the reading included in the KJV dates to the fourteenth century AD, some 1200 years after John’s time. Moreover, no theologian or apologist of the early church cites the language of the *Johannine Comma* in their efforts to explain and defend the doctrine of the trinity during the era of fierce battles over the doctrine of God. One would expect that the highly trinitarian language of the *Comma* would have been useful in their argumentation, if it was in their copies of 1 John. But no early church father mentions it.

Certainly, this added language found in the KJV is true in the sense that it refers to the trinity—a doctrine that is revealed in Scripture and essential to saving faith. However, it is not original, and support for the doctrine of the trinity can easily be gleaned from other texts without having to insist on the language of questionable late manuscripts. What is important here is what John—under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21)—actually wrote, and versions like the NASB render it in the English much more accurately.

But the challenge of 1 John 5:6–12 also includes one of the most intriguing interpretive issues in 1 John—namely, John’s meaning of “the water and the blood” in 5:6–8. What does it mean that Jesus “came by water and blood” (v. 6) or that “there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood” (vv. 7–8)? Although the language may seem strange at first glance, a survey of the background of 1 John—both with reference to the Gospel of John and with reference to the theological challenges of John’s day—provide much-needed clarity. It is to that we now turn.

1 John 5:6–12 – “Assurance and the Reception of God’s Word”

The apostle John writes,

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. It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son. The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son. And the testimony 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)

As he nears the end of the letter, the apostle John continues to advance his purpose of nurturing *assurance* among his readers (see 5:13). John does so in this section by explaining the authoritative testimony that supports belief in Jesus Christ. Where evidence is lacking and testimony is obscure, belief in any position will be tenuous at best. But where evidence is clear and trustworthy, and where testimony is consistent and authoritative, **belief is not only justified but obligated**. In such a case, assurance necessarily follows.

To trace this argument in 1 John 5:6–12, we will divide the section along these points: (I) the *nature* of the testimony (vv. 6–8); (II) the *weight* of the testimony (v. 9); and (III) the *demand* of the testimony (vv. 10–12).

I. The Nature of the Testimony (5:6–8).

John states, **“This is the One who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ”** (5:6a). Although John is beginning a new section, the phrase **“This is the One”** requires us to look at the previous verse, where John just spoke of **“Jesus”** as **“the Son of God”** (v. 5b). Obviously, this phrase also points to the middle of v. 6 itself, where John refers to **“Jesus Christ.”** Clearly, John’s focus is on *the person and identity of Jesus*.

Taking these references into account, John here describes Jesus in three important ways: (1) His name **“Jesus”** is a clear reference to His *human nature*, since **“Jesus”** was the name given to Him at His birth (see Matt 1:21). (2) The title **“Son of God”** is a clear reference to His *divine nature*, since it presupposes His eternality, transcendence, and authority. (3) That He is also called **“Christ”** indicates that He is the **“anointed One”** prophesied in the Old Testament—the One who would redeem His people and rule over them. These three titles summarize the identity of the One in focus here in 1 John 5:6–12. They also serve as the fundamental components of a true confession of faith.

- **Matthew 16:13–16** – “Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’”
- **John 20:31** – “but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.”

John says that this One **“came by water and blood.”** The verb **“came”** (as opposed to “comes” or “is coming”) implies that John has a *past historical appearance* in mind. He then describes this historical appearance as **“by water and the blood.”** The intriguing nature of this language has produced a lot of interpretations. Some have taken the phrase to refer to Jesus’ physical *birth* and *death*, but this runs into problems as you follow John’s logic through the rest of the section. Some have taken the phrase to refer to the “blood and water” that came from Jesus’ side at the crucifixion (see John 19:34–35), but that, too, doesn’t follow the logic of John’s argument. Some have interpreted the phrase as referring to the sacraments of *baptism* (“water”) and *the eucharist* (“blood”), but this also fails to connect with the context. So how should it be understood?

The term **“blood”** is the easiest of the two terms to identify, since John uses it elsewhere in the letter: “. . . the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1:7). In other words, “blood” is a word that represents the *atonement of Christ*, when He provided “the propitiation” for our sins (see also 2:2; 4:10; also 3:16).

So why does John emphasize that Jesus “came . . . by blood,” and that this “atonement” testifies to Jesus’ identity? The answer can be found in *a testimony* that was given when Jesus breathed His last and died on the cross: “When the centurion, who was standing right in front of Him, saw the way He breathed His last, he said, ‘Truly this man was the Son of God!’” (Mark 15:39; see also Matt 27:54). In other words, the *way* in which Jesus died provided direct, unequivocal proof as to His *identity*.

Likewise, when connected directly to the life of Jesus Christ, the term **“water”** becomes easier to identify. In fact, the apostle John’s use of the term “water” echoes his use of the term in his Gospel when he describes the *baptism of Jesus* by John the Baptist (see John 1:29–34). After baptizing Jesus, John the Baptist himself stated, “I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God” (1:34). Once again, *a testimony* is given as to Jesus’ identity. But it was not only John the Baptist who testified to Jesus as “the Son of God,” but the Father Himself. In a very unique moment which signaled the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, the Father declared that Jesus was “My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased” (Matt 3:16–17).

Putting these two ideas together then, **“the water and the blood” represent the inauguration and culmination of Jesus’ earthly ministry.** He was “the Son of God” at the beginning, and He was “the Son of God” as He finished the work of redemption on the cross and breathed His last breath. Why was this important for John to emphasize? He hints at it in the next statement: **“not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood”** (v. 6a). This statement reveals a point of contention that motivated John to write this letter. Specifically,

the *secessionists*—those who had revealed themselves to be false believers by their departure from the church (see 2:19, 22–23) and their promotion of a false Christ (see 4:1–6)—did not believe *that Christ had to die*. To them, the cross was *foolishness*. They believed in Jesus in some way as “Christ” at the beginning of His ministry, but they denied Him as “Christ” in His death (see also 1 Cor 1:23).

An example of this is the Gnostic heretic known as **Cerinthus** (c. AD 50–100). A contemporary of the apostle John, Cerinthus taught that Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary, but at his baptism, Christ descended upon him and empowered him until right before his death, when Christ departed and left Jesus to suffer as a mere man (see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I.26.1). It is likely a Christological heresy like this that John is here addressing (see 1 John 2:22; 4:2–3; 2 John 7–9). Gnostic false teachers like Cerinthus, growing in number and influence at the end of the apostolic age, believed that “Christ” could not and did not die. They either separated “Christ” from Jesus, or argued that Jesus only appeared to die but did not die in fact. John categorically rejects such ideas.

Having asserted the objective, historical testimony about Jesus’ identity provided at His baptism and death (and now recorded for us in the New Testament), John then introduces another level of testimony: **“It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth” (1 John 5:6b)**. In addition to the force of the indisputable facts of history, the Holy Spirit adds His own testimony. Although of a different nature, this testimony, too, focuses on the identity of Jesus Christ. This testimony does not add new facts to what is presented by the apostles in their testimony about “the water and the blood” (the full scope of Jesus’ earthly ministry bracketed by His baptism and crucifixion), but it takes these facts and *persuades* the individual *personally—in the soul*. As D. Edmond Hiebert writes, “Without His testimony the true significance of the ‘water and blood’ remains unintelligible to the natural human heart” (*Epistles of John*, 237). (On the need for the Spirit’s testimony to confess Jesus Christ truly, see 1 Cor 12:3.)

The noun “testimony” and the verb “to testify” occur nine times in 1 John 5:6–12.

After all, **“the Spirit is the truth.”** By using this language, John directly echoes Jesus’ own teaching about the ministry that the Holy Spirit would have after His departure from this world (see John 14:16–17; 15:26–27; 16:13). Jesus indicated that the Spirit is “the Spirit of truth” who would lead the disciples in the truth. In fact, the apostle John referenced this earlier in his letter when he described the Holy Spirit as **“the anointing”** which **“teaches you about all things”** (1 John 2:27). Theologians call this testimony of the Spirit *the internal witness*.

John closes this portion of the section by stating, **“For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.”** His reference to **“three that testify”** echoes the standard expressed throughout the Bible that conviction must be established “by two or three witnesses” (see Deut 17:6; 19:15; Matt 18:16; John 5:31–37; 8:17; 2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:19; Heb 10:28). Thus, John says that this standard has been met. The historical facts of “the water and the blood” and the internal testimony of “the Spirit” make the decision clear. All these testimonies agree. The case is watertight. Belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, is not only supported by the evidence, but the testimony makes belief in His identity *obligatory*.

II. The Weight of the Testimony (5:9)

That the testimony leads only to one rightful outcome—belief!—is developed by verse 9: **“If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son.”** John expresses this thought in the structure of a *conditional, if-then statement*. He states the condition as **“If we receive the testimony of men.”** The verb means “to accept as true” (synonymous with “to believe,” v. 10) and what is accepted as true is “the testimony of men.” What John refers to here is the general practice of believing testimony—even the testimony of mere men—once it has been corroborated by witnesses.

But John does not state the *then* part of this *if-then statement*; he simply assumes it. If we would add it in the text, we would state it something like this: **“then we should receive the testimony of God.”** In other words, John is arguing from the lesser to the greater: “if one thing is true, then it can be inferred that a second thing is even more certainly true.” If men’s testimony is accepted, God’s testimony should be accepted—and even more so!

It is because of this that John declares, **“The testimony of God is greater.”** Whatever regard we hold for *human* testimony (which is imperfect) should be exponentially greater for *divine* testimony (which is perfect).

What is the **“testimony”** that God has given? John states, **“that He has testified concerning His Son.”** God the Father has provided impeccable, incontrovertible testimony regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ. In fact, that John states that God **“has testified”** implies that this testimony has been given *once for all*. God does not need to be called back to the stand to clarify His testimony or answer more questions. His testimony contains no holes or contradictions. Rather, His testimony about His Son—given through the apostolic witness (see 1:1–3)—is *sufficient* and *complete*. As such, there is no basis upon which to reject this testimony!

III. The Demand of the Testimony (5:10–12)

As the saying goes, *evidence demands a verdict*. John states, **“The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son” (5:10).**

John contends that the only right response to the evidence provided in the testimony of God about His Son is to **“believe.”** “Belief” here is not mere *assent* to the historical facts of Jesus’ earthly ministry, but an *embrace* of those facts as true *for me*. As John Murray stated, “Faith is knowledge passing into conviction, and it is conviction passing into confidence.” Regarding the one who exercises this faith, John states that he **“has the testimony in himself.”** In other words, God’s objective, clear, authoritative witness about His Son, Jesus Christ, is no longer just an external fact. It has been *embraced as truth in the soul*.

Regarding the one who refuses to believe, John states that he **“has made Him a liar.”** John is not speaking hyperbolically. He insists that the testimony needed for knowledge/conviction/confidence in Jesus Christ is so watertight that anything but a sincere acceptance of this testimony is a judgment against God Himself. And such a judgment is not inconsequential—it is to call the God of Light **“a liar.”**

John concludes the section with a pointed summary: **“And the testimony 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” (5:11–12).**

For Discussion

1. Explain the theological significance of each of these three descriptions: “Jesus,” “Christ,” and “Son of God.” Why is belief in what each of these descriptions represent the basis for saving faith? What biblical texts refer to the importance of belief in each of these three?
2. Describe the view of the heretics (the secessionists) addressed in 1 John as it related to the person of Jesus Christ. Identify several of the key texts in 1 John and 2 John that reference their views.
3. How does John’s reaction to and condemnation of the heretical views about the person and work of Christ inform us as to our posture toward those who drift away from the biblical testimony about Christ?
4. How are we to understand the spiritual state and destiny of those who reject the Bible’s testimony about Jesus?
5. How would you answer the unbeliever who responds to the presentation of the gospel with the excuse, “I need more evidence before I can believe?”

For Further Study

1. **Memorize** Matthew 16:15–16 and 1 John 5:11–12.
2. **Sing** “Speak, O Lord” (*Hymns of Grace*, 368).
3. **Listen to** the three-part sermon series by John MacArthur, “The Essential Ministry of the Holy Spirit,” accessible here: <https://www.gty.org/sermons/series/322/taking-the-mystery-out-of-the-spirits-work>.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.

Next meeting: May 6 – 7pm – “Assurance and the Success of Prayer, 1 John 5:13–17” (Brad Klassen)