

A Plausible Interpretation of a Most Difficult Passage

by Rev. Tom Aicken

(6) “This is He who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. (7) For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. (8) And there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one.” 1 John 5:6-8.

The best, most faithful commentators of Holy Scripture have not agreed in their interpretation of this passage – indeed, there is considerable disagreement among them – and, in light of that, I will not be dogmatic in offering my own interpretation. Nevertheless, I will present what I believe is a view worthy of serious consideration. The difficulty in understanding the passage is found in vv. 6 and 8. What does it mean, for instance, that Jesus came by water and blood? And what are these three earthly witnesses of Spirit, water and blood?

As difficult as this passage may seem to be on the surface, and understandably so, I believe there is one interpretation which stands out above the others because it is based, not on the words or imagery alone, but on what is clearly John’s intended purpose for expressing himself in this way. So, then, we have to begin with the question, ‘What is the apostle seeking to tell us? What is the message behind the words and imagery he uses?’

He is attempting to communicate, I submit, how Christians can know beyond all shadow of doubt that Jesus of Nazareth really is the Messiah, the One anointed of God to be our Redeemer, the only Mediator between God and men, and therefore the only name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved. How, on the one hand, could people living in John’s own day know this with any certainty? What things did God do to confirm this truth? And how, on the other hand, can we know it with that same assurance today? What has God given to drive home this lesson also to us?

V. 6, therefore, is not simply that Jesus came into the world by water and by blood, but that He came and was made known by these means. That is right. Here is the confirming evidence God has given us to establish, and how we might

know beyond all doubt, that Jesus really is the Son of God. This is the point that John is setting forth for his readers in the first century, as well as for us now. Jesus coming by water, on the one hand, is a reference to His baptism. He was baptized at about 30 years of age (Luke 3), as priests were first set apart at that age (Num. 4), and, what is more, He had to be so set apart in order to be our great High Priest; this was necessary, we are told, in order to fulfill all righteousness (Matt. 3:15). In other words, no one could become a priest under ceremonial law without the sprinkling of water in baptism which set him apart for holy office. But what happened at Jesus' baptism was particularly striking. A voice came from heaven, a voice audible to all who were gathered there, declaring, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). What a powerful testimony from God the Father Himself that Jesus, being the brightness of His glory and express image of His Person, is indeed the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Saviour, the very One whom the people of Israel had waited so long to see!

Jesus coming by blood, on the other hand, is a reference to His death. What happened while He was still on the cross was another convincing testimony of the same thing. Not only was the veil of the temple torn in two from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51) – an event that only the priests could witness, and was undoubtedly a powerful testimony that helped to persuade many of them later to turn to Christ (Acts 6:7) – but the earth also quaked, the rocks split, the graves were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had earlier died were later raised (when Jesus was resurrected) and appeared to many in Jerusalem. This moved the centurion and those who were with him guarding Jesus to express with godly fear, "Truly, this was the Son of God!" (Matt. 27:51-53). Notice, what the Father declared of His Son at Jesus' baptism was the very same message that was demonstrated to be true, and freely confessed by men, at His death. On both occasions, what a remarkable and overwhelming testimony given to a great many people of who Jesus is, and why it is that we need not look for another!

We can appreciate that, for all who saw and heard these things, it must have left an indelible impression, especially for those who later came to faith in Christ. But what about us today? We were not there. We did not see such things with our own eyes, nor hear them with our own ears. What assurance can we have that Jesus is the Son of God? What can we, as believers, cling to with the same hope and joy and peace, and continue to do so even in our trials and tribulations? This

is where v. 8 comes in, the three continuing witnesses which have been ordained of God to give us this assurance, to minister to our need, to strengthen us when, if left to ourselves, our faith would surely fail.

Let us begin with the second of these witnesses, the water. The water this time is a reference, not to Jesus' baptism, but to the believer's own baptism. The sprinkling of water in Christian baptism is not for setting someone apart for the priesthood, but is rather a sign of regeneration, a symbol of what every child needs and only believers have. This sprinkling of water is also a seal, something to confirm the promise and faithfulness of the Lord. Whether he accepts this testimony or not, it says to the infant growing up and is meant to assure him if only he would believe it, "If you trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be saved." As a seal, baptism is also meant as a confirmation to the believer, something that by faith he may now hang onto and of which he may be fully assured, namely, the fact that he has a saving interest in Christ, that he will be kept by the power of God through faith for a salvation which has yet to be revealed in all its fulness.

Do you have such assurance, believer? I know that our faith can be very weak at times, but a weak faith is still a true faith, a saving faith, and our baptism stands as a visible witness, not of our ability to hold onto the Lord, but of His unwavering commitment to the task of holding onto us. Those whom the Father gives to His Son will come to Him, and He will not cast us out (John 6:37), nor can anyone snatch us from His hand (John 10:28-30). Is baptism, then, not a powerful earthly witness to both who Jesus is and our eternal security in Him?

Let us move on now to the third of these witnesses, the blood. This is, I suggest, the Lord's Supper. "Now hold on a moment," you may say; "how can we suddenly assume that the blood of v. 8 is a reference to the holy supper?" Well, it is not as strange as at first it might seem. Of the supper Jesus said, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20), and Paul tells us, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). Just as baptism is a sign of our new life and cleansing, so the supper is a sign of our being united to Christ and feeding on Him. It is meant to seal to believers what we have in Christ, and to assure our failing hearts of what He has done for us, that He is therefore ours and we are His forever. Is it not, then, another powerful earthly witness to who Jesus is and our eternal security in Him?

I have saved the first-mentioned witness, the Holy Spirit, to last. He is the One who testifies of Christ (John 15:26), who testifies with our spirits, believer, that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16), who is the guarantee of our inheritance (Eph. 1:14), and who helps us in all our weaknesses (Rom. 8:26,27). Indeed, it is only by this work of the Holy Spirit upon our hearts, believer, bearing witness to the Word that the Spirit first caused holy men of old to write down (2 Pet. 1:21), that baptism and the holy supper become to us such persuasive testimonies of Christ and His redeeming grace. To the unbeliever, to any man or woman dead in sin and unresponsive to the Word of God, these sacraments mean nothing at all; yet, to the believer, these visible expressions of God's Word when added to the spoken Word can pierce the heart, rejoice the soul and reinvigorate the will.

This is why, dear Christian, we should always seek to be present whenever someone in our fellowship is to be baptized, and to partake of the elements, the bread and the wine, every time they are served. There is no special blessing to these sacraments apart from the spoken word, and they add nothing more than what is already present in the spoken word, yet to the languishing soul, to the weak believer overcome with assaults from the evil one, they can be as refreshing and stimulating as cold water on a blistering hot day.

Before we leave this subject, note the reference to the Trinity in v. 7. Some have said that this does not belong here because it is not found in some of the ancient texts of Holy Scripture. As Calvin points out, however, because it is found in the best copies of those manuscripts, and because it makes the argument of John even stronger, there is no reason not to accept it as the true reading. And it is right here that a compelling comparison is made. Just as the three Persons of the Godhead are of one substance, so the three witnesses testifying to divine realities here on earth agree as one, or, if you like, say one and the same thing. There is no discrepancy. The civil law in the Old Testament required two (or better, three) witnesses to establish what was true, and should therefore be believed, in a court of law (Deut. 19:15; 2 Cor. 13:1). In the same way, the Lord our God has condescended to provide us with these three witnesses here on earth – the Spirit, the water and the blood – and there is no surer testimony that can be unveiled to us than that of our Triune God who speaks to us from heaven, and whose throne is built on the foundation of righteousness and justice (Psalm 89:14).

