

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE SPIRIT, AND THE WATER, AND THE BLOOD.

It is an extraordinary thing that the famous passage in St. John's Epistle about the three that bear witness on earth should even yet be so dark to the majority of Christian people, and that the great commentators should throw so little definite light upon it. These three, says the writer, are in absolute agreement: the question, therefore, as to which their testimony is given must be regarded as settled. *Causa finita est.* One feels that the readers of the Epistle must have understood at once what question it was, who the Three Witnesses were, and in what fashion their witness was so entirely consentient. Why should we have to remain in any doubt?

For two reasons, apparently. One of these is to be found unquestionably in the unfortunate interpolation about the Three that bear record in heaven. That it was an interpolation is agreed by all: that it was an innocent one, perhaps accidental, anyhow free of any intention to deceive, will be granted by most. But that does not make it harmless. To interpolate into a document words which are in themselves true does harm in two ways: it throws discredit upon the truth when the interpolation is discovered: apart from that it distracts attention from the document itself, and throws the interpretation of it into confusion. Doubtless the mention of the Three on earth suggested to the unknown annotator the Three in heaven; but the analogy was and is a false one, and merely serves to mislead the reader.

The other, and probably the still more active cause of confusion has been the fact that the writer of the Fourth Gospel—presumably the same that wrote the Epistle—tells us of the blood and water from our Saviour's side

at the Crucifixion. The unexpectedness of that incident evidently made a deep impression upon him. He makes no attempt to interpret it : he does not imply that he read any meaning into it himself : but he does call special attention to the fact. It was extremely natural, therefore, to take for granted that he had that incident somehow in view when he wrote about Jesus Christ coming "by" or "with" the water and the blood. Well, he might certainly have been thinking of the incident of the pierced side at Calvary. But then no one can get any farther with this clue : it leads to nothing but the vaguest sort of mysticism which may well do duty in hymns and meditations, but is entirely unsatisfying to the student of Scripture. Moreover it is put out of court by three considerations. First, it cannot reasonably be said that our Lord "came" by or through that incident upon the Cross, only known apparently to the one who watched it so narrowly. Secondly, it cannot with any more reason be maintained that the blood and water from the pierced side bear witness now : they may, or may not, have had some separate and definite suggestion in them for St. John : all that he passes on to us is the fulfilment of two scriptures by the two facts that His legs *were not* broken, and that His side *was* pierced : the blood and water stand in Scripture absolutely without connexion and without explanation, nor does primitive tradition even attempt to supply any clue. Thirdly—and this is very important as against the "mystical" interpretation—our writer has deliberately inverted the order of the two. From the side of Jesus, says the Evangelist, came forth blood and water : not only blood as might have been expected, but a perceptible amount of water too. Jesus came, says the writer of the Epistle by water and blood : not with the water only—as some, presumably, were in danger of thinking—but with the water

and with the blood. Had he been in his own mind referring back to that incident of the Crucifixion—translating it, as it were, into mystical theology—he would surely not have treated its details in such an arbitrary fashion as to have inverted the order of its component parts.

If, however, we dismiss as misleading any direct reference to the pierced side, the whole passage springs at once into a luminous clearness : it puts into intimate connexion with one another the most certain and most important factors in the earthly careers of Christ and of His body the Church.

For when it says that Jesus Christ “came,” that peculiarly simple expression is most naturally illustrated from such texts as St. John i. 6, 11, St. Luke vii. 33, 34. If indeed we were hearing of the glorified Christ who fills so largely the field of vision in St. Paul’s letters, He might better be said to have “come” by the message of the angel, or by the Virgin-birth at Bethlehem. But it is the man Christ Jesus, seen and heard and handled in His historic manifestation, whom our writer has in view, and whom he asserts as against the nascent docetism which seems to him so absolutely fatal. Now the story of Christ, as everywhere told, took its start from the Baptism in Jordan (Acts i. 22 ; x. 37 ; xviii. 25), that baptism which had, and has still, so deep and so wide a significance for the doctrine of the Beloved Son who is at once our Lord and our Representative. The baptism of Christ has only lost (to a great degree) its hold upon the mind and thought of the Church because of the more excellent glory of the death upon the Cross. In other words, the water reddened into blood—as, at Cana, it reddened into wine—and blood is thicker than water in this sense also. But as a simple matter of fact it was by and in these two events, i.e. by the water and the blood, that He became known to the

world and succeeded (after a very short ministry) in impressing Himself so powerfully, so indelibly, upon His own generation that He has never been in any danger of being forgotten, never ceased to be recognised, admired, and loved by ever-increasing multitudes. We are here on absolutely firm ground, all controversies apart. Our Lord's baptism by the Forerunner governed the whole of His earthly manifestation *a parte ante*; our Lord's crucifixion governed it as entirely *a parte post*. You cannot sum up His story in a more telling or more pregnant phrase than by saying that He "came by water and blood."

Nor may the following warning "not with the water only, but with the water *and* the blood" be considered redundant or unpractical. No doubt there were heretical people known to the writer who resolved the crucifixion into a vain show in which there was no "blood"—no real suffering, no actual death. But as it happens we know of one, a very good and earnest Christian as far as he went, who stopped short at the "water." The story of Apollos (Acts xviii. 24-28), brief as it is, is extraordinarily suggestive. He was an enthusiastic disciple of the Lord, and eager to share his enthusiasm with others—and yet he knew "only the baptism of John!" That must surely mean that he knew all about John's baptism of our Lord, his testimony to Him, and those profoundly illuminative "signs" which accompanied the baptism. He knew our Lord as the Beloved Son, as the chosen and dedicated representative of the race, as the Lamb of God taking up already—in order to take away—the sins of the world. The "water" had yielded up to him all its secrets. But, by force of some strange circumstances unknown to us, he knew no more, he knew not of "the blood," until it was made known to him by the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila. Not with the water of His baptism only, Apollos—

He *did* "come," as thou thyself art witness, that way : but He came also (and even more) with the blood of His Cross.

We have now to quit the past—the historic past on which the faith which overcomes is founded—and to consider the present state (already present then, still present now) of Christ's religion. "It is the Spirit which beareth witness, because the Spirit is the truth." That is, of course, in accordance with our Lord's most true promise, "when the Comforter is come—even the Spirit of truth—he shall bear witness of me." It is also *the* distinctive feature of Christianity—this sustained and ever-recurrent witness of the indwelling Spirit in the hearts *and* in the lives of good Christians, always, everywhere. It is *the* distinctive feature which makes it a religion *sui generis*, without a rival or a substitute—a living religion as distinguished from all dead religions, all mere book religions, all systems of ethics, all philosophies of life and death. The true disciple of Christ hath the Spirit, and the eternal necessity of the Spirit is to witness : he hath, therefore, the witness in himself, for the Spirit bears witness at once to him, and through him. It cannot be otherwise : and this (once more) is *the* distinctive feature of Christianity, not its morality, not its sacramental system, not even its creed.

The Spirit cannot but witness because He is the truth—and truth must out. But in witnessing (since He is, not indeed an incarnate, but essentially an indwelling Spirit) He takes to Himself, and *needs* to take, other two voices and associates them with Himself in witness. The voices which He thus takes to Himself, that they may blend with His own, must needs be human voices in some way. For thus our Lord added (St. John xv. 27) "and ye also bear witness"—or more pointedly perhaps "and bear ye also witness." He put it thus, counting, as it were,

downwards: but the Apostles, reckoning from their side upwards, said, "we are (His) witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Ghost whom God hath given"—not to us only, but in general—"to them that obey Him." Obviously, therefore, *not* the Spirit of inspiration which moved the sacred writers, but the indwelling Spirit vouchsafed to all the faithful servants of God.

There are, then, three that bear witness, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood; and the three agree in one: the impression that they make, the conviction which they bring home, is identical. The meaning of it is simple and trenchant and clear when once we call to mind the fact that the life of the church corresponds to the life of Christ—that the water and the blood must have the same significance for the Bride as for the Bridegroom—that the water must stand for baptism, the blood for martyrdom.

The Christian convert no sooner believed in Christ than he was called upon to bear witness to Him and for Him by being baptized. It was an ordeal from which the great majority very soon came to shrink, as they do now in India and in all organised heathen societies. It implied then, as it does now, a complete break with the past: not only with the moral evil of that past, its sins and follies, but also (let us remember) with much that was innocent and beautiful, with the intimate affections and "sweet charities" of home. It involved then, as it often does now, social excommunication, loss of home and friends, persecution. It must have caused frightful suffering when the dependent member of a Jewish or heathen family by being baptized cut himself or herself adrift from all the sympathy, support, respect of that little group which had meant everything to him or her. There are to-day a multitude of people in India and elsewhere, morally convinced of the truth of Christianity, who simply dare not

be baptized. And there is, be it observed, a certain volume of Christian opinion in favour of letting them be. It is a duty to take the line of least resistance, where good is to be done. Why should these poor souls be called upon to endure a publicity and incur an odium which is dreadful to them, and foreign to all that is best in their previous training? Would it not be better for India to have an increasing multitude more or less Christian in thought and feeling, and to drop the demand for baptism? The answer comes at once: a Christian is one that has the Spirit: the Spirit *must* witness to Christ, because He is the truth: the Spirit *cannot* witness unless He associates with Himself the witness of the water. No discipleship without witness: no salvation from Christ without a duty of testifying. Even when the salvation was only bodily, the duty arose. "Go," He said to the leper whom first He healed, "show thyself to the priest, and offer for thy cleansing the things which Moses commanded, *for a testimony unto them.*" (St. Mark i. 44; cf. vi. 11.) That the man went straightway and testified in other (forbidden) ways, to our Lord's great inconvenience, is characteristically true; but it does not alter the fact that he *was* under obligation to testify. Now being baptized was already a well-recognised form of "witness" in the religious world of our Lord's day. It was a witness from which the Pharisees and lawyers very naturally shrank, while "all the people and the publicans" accepted it and were baptized, thereby "justifying God"—in other words, bearing witness to Him. It is not necessary to point out that it would have cost the Pharisees and lawyers ever so much more to submit to John's baptism than it did the publicans and sinners: all the same in refusing John's baptism they "rejected for themselves the counsel of God." Our Lord's disciples, therefore, were to be baptized, and no exception, no allowance, was made. "He that

believeth and is baptized shall be saved." Whatever else it was, it was a test, often bitterly unwelcome, sometimes apparently cruel. Its very definiteness and publicity made it "a testimony unto them." Our Lord expected, and expects, all His disciples to have the courage of their opinions, of their convictions. He demanded *that* again and again in the most (shall we say ?) exaggerated terms, in language so extreme that we shrink from it still. Reflected in this language so stern, so menacing, we may read how intolerably hard was the ordeal in a multitude of cases, how desperately the poor frightened creatures would try to avoid it. What our Lord needed (and needs still) was above all "witness," and that witness must in the first instance be that of the water. A Christian who avoided baptism did not and could not witness to any one or anything: he only bore witness against himself that he dared not confess Christ, dared not trust Him, dared not face loss and shame for His sake. When we read in the New Testament about baptism, do we not (as so often) err because we fail to perceive that the primary thing about it was not what the baptized was to *get* (by way of spiritual blessing) but what he was to *give*—what he was to do for his Master and for those around him? Instantly, in the act of becoming a Christian, he was to become (in a lesser, but very true and arduous sense) what our Lord called Antipas, "*My witness, my faithful one.*" (Rev. ii. 13.) "Witness" is the keynote of Christian discipleship: and, first, the witness of the water—in baptism.

But the water alone was not enough. From the first the higher witness of death for Christ was invoked to supplement and substantiate the lesser witness of life for Christ. "Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin," cries the writer to the Hebrews in tones of grave reproach. What sin? Obviously that to which they were so sorely

tempted, poor, depressed, feeble-minded folk that they were : the sin of apostasy, of turning their backs upon Christ, of pretending (like Peter) that they did not know the man, and did not care for him. They had suffered much—social and ecclesiastical excommunication, spoiling of their goods, etc. But they had not yet sealed their testimony with their blood, and they shrank from the thought of it. It is surely disquieting to find the sacred writer laying so much stress upon this ultimate test of fidelity—disquieting, because so few of us would stand it. When English people (and indeed European Christians generally) *have* been caught in the evil net of the Mahdi or of some other fierce fanatic, they have shown (to say the least) no genius for martyrdom. The ordinary western Christian sees no great harm probably in formal apostasy, because it does not make any real difference to his beliefs, and it is only temporary—until the tyranny be overpast. Why throw away his life for a “form” ? On which footing he would certainly have cast the few grains of incense upon the altar of the god Caesar. As far as we can tell, it was because the primitive Christians looked at the matter from our Lord’s point of view, and not from their own, that they obstinately refused to sacrifice, and so (in the long run) overcame the world. “Witness” was wanted first and foremost, witness culminating in martyrdom, but always remaining witness to Christ, witness before men. The Spirit bare witness, dwelling in their hearts and so filling them with a conscious joy and peace in believing ; influencing their lives, and so making them—not indeed perfect, but recognisably better than other people. But to the voice of the Spirit answered the voices of the water and of the blood ; the witness of those who forsook all other calls and considerations in order to follow Christ ; the witness of those who laid down their lives

for His sake. And these three agreed in one. There was a harmony of witness so complete, so unmistakeable, so convincing, that it prevailed over all the prejudice and all the indifference of the heathen world.

It is the sufficient justification of this interpretation of the water and the blood, that it corresponds exactly to the facts as they were, and also as they are. The Spirit is calling to-day, more loudly and urgently, may be, than ever. The water and the blood must answer His call, if the religion of Christ is really to win any fresh victories. They will not be secured by any amount of fine words, by any expenditure of money or of printer's ink. The open and manly confession of Christ before men, the readiness even to die in His service—when these are found amongst Christians at large, when these are heard to witness loud and clear in harmony with the witness of the Spirit, then will dawn a new day of conquest for the Lord's Anointed.

RAYNER WINTERBOTHAM.