

- c. John was unequivocal that Christians stand in triumph over the world – both the world powers that actively oppose them and the cursed creation they continue to inhabit. This triumph, however, doesn't end the world's opposition and contradiction. The Father's children continue to be subject to the dark powers and the world under their control; indeed the nature of their triumph actually heightens the onslaught against them. Yet they *have* overcome the world as sharers in Jesus' own victory over the powers and the curse. Those adversaries continue to come against them, but as conquered foes emptied of their ultimate power. Satan's power of condemnation and death has been broken (Hebrews 2:14-15) and the Father's children have been set free of it (cf. Matthew 12:22-29; Luke 4:14-21; John 8:31-32, 12:31-32; Romans 6:5-11, 8:1-4; Revelation 12:1-11). Mortality endures as the final enemy of God's image-sons, but Jesus' resurrection demonstrates that it, too, is overthrown; the children's present inner renewal is the promise of bodily resurrection and immortality (1 Corinthians 15; 2 Corinthians 4:1-5:4). And so, while the enemies continue to oppress and afflict, Christ's victory – which is the victory of all of the Father's children – has stripped them of their ultimate power of condemnation, death and destruction.

Christians are victorious over the world, and John attached this triumph to their *faith*. But not “faith” in the natural human sense of abstract, whimsical and self-oriented confidence in beneficent powers (whether or not they're called “god”), but faith in the person of *Jesus the Messiah* – the Son of God who came into the world as the embodiment of God's person and purpose; the Son who came “*in water and in blood*” (5:6).

John previously connected faith in Jesus with His identity as the Son of God and Messiah (2:22-23, 4:2, 15, 5:1), but he here enlarged those concepts by adding that the messianic Son came into the world in connection with *water* and *blood*. It seems that John regarded these ideas as central to the significance of Jesus' sonship and messianic mission. And because sonship and messiahship are the focal point of a person's authentic faith in Jesus – the faith that yields triumph over the world, it's important to try to discern his meaning. The most obvious challenge is the fact that he didn't explain or clarify what he was talking about. However, the statements themselves and John's larger instruction in his various writings provide some clues as to his meaning.

- The first clue is the way John distinguished between water and blood. He gives the impression that, from his perspective, Jesus' coming “in water” was widely acknowledged, but not so with the issue of blood: “*not in water only, but in water and in blood.*”
- Another issue is John's use of two different prepositions in referring to the water and blood. These prepositions can be interchangeable, but they also have distinct meanings. John could have been saying that Jesus came *in, through, by, along with, or in connection with* water and blood, and scholars have taken various positions.

- It's also notable that John viewed the blood and water as bearing witness to Jesus, with their testimony agreeing with the Spirit's witness (5:7-8). Finally, this three-fold witness – water, blood and Spirit – constituted God's own witness to His Son (5:9).
- Looking beyond the immediate context, some see a parallel in John's account of Jesus' crucifixion, for there he also connected faith in Jesus with water and blood (John 19:32-35).

These observations (and many others) have led to numerous interpretations, with the following being some of the more plausible among them:

- 1) The first is that the water and blood should be taken together as signifying Jesus' *sacrificial death*. This view draws on John's description of Jesus' death in John 19:32-35. He "came in connection with water and blood," then, in the sense that He came to give Himself as an atoning sacrifice and source of life (John 1:29-30, 7:37-39, 12:27-32; also Matthew 20:25-28).
- 2) A second view is that John was speaking of the *incarnation*. The idea here is that the phenomenon of the incarnation involved the Logos taking on human *flesh*, with flesh being aptly characterized by water and blood (even as the flow of water and blood showed the death of Jesus' body).
- 3) Another option is that water and blood signify Jesus' *birth* and *death*. This corresponds to his previous assertion that God's love – and so God's person (4:8) – has its full manifestation in the Son's incarnation and His propitiatory (reconciling) work (4:9-10). God fully disclosed Himself to men through Jesus the Messiah in incarnation and propitiation, and thus authentic faith in God is faith in the One who "came in water and blood."
- 4) A more common view is that John was using water and blood to signify the two great testamentary acts of Jesus' *baptism* and *death*. There are two particular strengths to this view: First of all, it works well with the idea of the Spirit's witness alongside the water and blood. With respect to water, the Spirit was active in the incarnation, but not in an open, testamentary way as He was in Jesus' baptism (cf. Luke 1:26-35 with 3:21-22). Secondly, this view suits the context, for the unified witness of water, blood and Spirit is to the truth that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God, and John treated this witness as refuting the "antichrist" deniers. If these deniers did indeed have Gnostic leanings, it makes sense that John would focus on Jesus' baptism and crucifixion. For, Gnostic Christians had no problem associating the Christ phenomenon with Jesus' baptism (some taught that the Christ spirit descended on the man Jesus at his baptism), but none were willing to grant that the Christ was executed on a Roman cross. Thus John's insistence that the Christ came, not only in connection with water (baptism), but also in connection with blood (crucifixion).

It's impossible to know for certain what John had in mind, but his readers obviously understood his imagery. This suggests that this way of describing the Lord was familiar to at least some communities in the first-century Church. Unfortunately, contemporary Christians don't share this insight, and so must do the best they can to decipher John's meaning. Of the reasonable interpretations, it seems most likely that either the third or fourth views above is correct. But because Jesus' baptism affirmed His solidarity with Israel as a son of Adam and Abraham, His baptism as God's only-begotten Son implies the incarnation – the divine Son becoming a son of Israel. And so, even if John was referring to Jesus' baptism and crucifixion, he still had the incarnation squarely in mind.

- d. John regarded the water and blood as witnesses to Jesus as God's Son and Messiah, but he linked their witness with that of the Spirit (5:7-9). There are two possible ways of understanding this connection. The first is that the Spirit opens up and makes effectual the witness of the water and the blood; the second is that the water and blood are *themselves* the Spirit's testimony because they concern the messianic Son who was empowered and led by the Spirit. In the end, both are true, so one need not decide between them. What John wanted to emphasize is that the Spirit's witness is true because He *is* the truth, even as the Son is the truth (John 14:6). The Spirit is a true witness because He testifies to Jesus (John 14:16-28, 15:26-16:15), and His testimony *agrees* with the witness of the water and blood (5:7-8). The implication, then, is that the water and blood also bear truthful witness; they speak truthfully of the One who is the truth. Spirit, water and blood constitute three agreeing witnesses, and so fully meet the Mosaic requirement for establishing the truth of any matter (ref. Deuteronomy 19:15; Matthew 18:15-16; 1 Timothy 5:19). And because the three form an unassailable witness to the messianic Son, *it follows that a person cannot know Jesus in truth unless he knows Him in terms of the water and the blood as informed by the Spirit.*

It's worthwhile at this point to mention the different reading of verses 7-8 found in the KJV. This passage is often referred to as the *Johannine Comma* (Comma Johanneum), and the King James reading reflects an addition to the Greek text published by Erasmus in 1522. Other than the Erasmus text, this reading occurs only in three very late (14th to 17th century) manuscripts, none of which authenticates it. Erasmus himself knew of no manuscript containing this reading, but was pressured to include it and reluctantly complied. Erasmus' work was foundational to the *Textus Receptus* (Received Text), which underlies the King James Version. This is why the KJV and NKJV continue to include this addition.

- e. The Spirit, the water and the blood testify of Jesus individually and in solidarity. And their witness, according to John, is *God's* witness (5:9). This is easy to see in the case of the Spirit, because the Spirit is the Spirit of God. But the witness of the water and blood are equally God's witness, because they represent Jesus' person and work, and He is the embodiment of the living God and His purposes. The one who sees the Son sees the Father who sent Him, and the one who knows the Son knows the Father (1:1-3, 2:23-24, 4:15; cf. also John 1:14-18, 14:1-11).

The Spirit's witness is true, because He *is* the truth; everything He communicates, whatever the manner and form, is precisely and entirely true. So it is with the water and blood that testify of the Son whose coming was "in the Spirit." And all of these dimensions of witness are God's own witness, which, for John, makes it compelling. If human beings are naturally receptive to the testimony of other people – and they are, how much more ought they receive God's testimony? At its best, human witness is flawed because human perception and discernment are imperfect; people see in part and know in part. But God has no such limitations; He is a perfect witness. God's witness is often misrepresented and misunderstood, but this is a human failure, not a divine one. It ought to be a first principle that God's witness is true and trustworthy and should be received without question or hesitation. If there is confusion or uncertainty, it belongs to the recipient.

- f. Here, this divine witness is to the *incarnate Son*, Jesus the Messiah. God's witness is full-orbed in that He testifies to the truth of all things, whether Himself or His creation and His purposes for it. But all of the dimensions of God's witness converge on His Son, for He is the embodied and enacted truth of all things. In Him, the person, purposes and work of the living God are "yes and amen." So John's point: *The human obligation to receive the witness of the God who is true is fulfilled by embracing in truth the Son who is the subject of that witness. And that means embracing the Son as God has testified to Him, not according to human notions or speculation.* Embracing a "Christ" other than the one attested by God indicts God as a liar just as much as refusing the Son altogether (5:10).
- g. God's objective witness to His Son, then, becomes personal, subjective witness when it is received and believed. This internal witness (the witness that one has "in himself") has two dimensions: The first is the *personal affirmation* of God's witness becoming one's own, and the second is the *testimonial witness* that is given to others as they observe the truth of God in His children. This outward testimonial witness has a verbal component, but it has its substance in lives that express the life and nature of the Father and Son. Proclamation is of little or no value in the absence of living witness.

And the marrow of this witness is the divine goal and triumph of *life out of death* (5:11-12). This triumph began with the incarnation of the Son (1:1-2; John 1:4), and reached its climax with His resurrection from the dead. The resurrected Messiah is the first fruits of God's victory over death, and it is *His* undying life – which is the life of God Himself – that now flows out to Adam's race through the power of the life-giving Spirit: *the one who has the Son has the life; the one who does not have the Son does not have the life* (cf. John 6:22-58, 11:1-27; 1 Corinthians 15). One day, the Son's triumph over death will see the liberation and renewal of the entire cursed creation (Romans 8:18-22). In that day, the promise of life out of death that originated in Eden and looks to a new heavens and earth will be fully realized; then and forever God will be "all in all," as His life in His image-children floods the world with His presence and love. In that day, the Father will have fulfilled His eternal purpose to sum up all things in His Son.