

The Three Earthly Witnesses: The Water, the Spirit, and the Blood

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This is He that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth. 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 on earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one. — 1 John 5:6-8

Dear Brethren! A text of the deepest import this day demands our attention. The profound mind of the Apostle John has a great object in view; it is his design to point out those evidences which cannot fail to crush our last doubts in the Divinity of the Messiah; while, at the same time, he would furnish us with a test by which we may discover with certainty whether we have, each one for ourselves, secured our interest in this Jesus. With such and such signs of power and dignity, he says, Jesus came, and still comes; and he declares that we need no further witness to His being the Lord of heaven and Savior of the world. And we respond to his words with our whole hearts. What, then, are these signs? You have already heard. “This is He,” says the Apostle, “who came and who comes (the Greek form of the verb bears both meanings) by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth.” The mention of this Holy Trinity upon earth having led the Apostle to cast an eagle glance into the heavenly world, and reveal the mystery of mysteries in the declaration, “There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one,” he resumes his former subject, adding, “there are three that bear witness on earth, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree in one.” We will now inquire what we are to understand by these three last witnesses for the Son of God? We will direct our attention to the threefold witness for Jesus as the Messiah and Savior of the world: first, in the water; then in the blood; and, finally, in the Holy Spirit. And may the Spirit of Truth Himself graciously be with us, whether we speak or hear, and unfold and shed light upon those profound mysteries which we are about to consider.

1. Christ comes, first, “by water,” and the water witnesses for Him. Most persons suppose that

baptism is here intended; and I myself thought so formerly. But a closer study of those mysterious words has induced me to change my opinion. Baptism does, indeed, witness of Christ in the world, as His institution. It proclaims, in symbolical language, that in Him, and in His blood alone, there is remission of sins. It ever proclaims anew, by means of the Word of God, which accompanies and upholds it, His essential unity with the Father and the Spirit. But John adduces his three witnesses, not so much as witnessing of the Lord, but rather as witnessing and attesting for Him. Now, it might be urged, that baptism is a witness for Jesus by displaying that standard which announces the continued existence and undiminished zeal and activity of His church. But this witness would be too inconsiderable, as a witness *for* the Lord; hardly of greater weight, indeed, than the casual claim of a Mussulman for the divine mission of his prophet Mahomet, in the continuance for more than twelve centuries of the rite of circumcision, which he adopted and enjoined. If baptism caused each one who partook of that ordinance to come out of its waters evidently and confessedly a new creature, it would then certainly be a loud and powerful witness *for* Jesus. But is this the case? By no means. A baptized child, in its outward appearance, differs in no wise from an unbaptized one. And besides, if the first witness—the water—were baptism, then the second, namely, the blood, must necessarily be understood to mean the Lord's Supper; and this, indeed, is affirmed by those who admit the former. But that such a signification of the "blood" is inadmissible, we shall hereafter be able to prove. So much, at least, is certain, that St. John, in speaking of the water by which Jesus came and still comes, did not allude to baptism.

To what, then, does he allude? This is still a disputed question. John evidently denotes, by those three mysterious words, "water, blood, and the Spirit," Divine powers and agencies which continually maintain, and attest as a fact, the dignity of Christ, as Messiah and Savior. As an Israelite, the Apostle was familiar with water in the Temple service, as the permanent type of moral cleansing and purification. You must remember the deep meaning which he recognized in the circumstance narrated in his Gospel, that out of the pierced side of his Master flowed "blood and water." He evidently saw therein the symbol of two of the most essential agencies employed by Jesus in the salvation of mankind. The water was to him the emblem, not assuredly of baptism, but generally of the morally purifying power of the Prince of Life. And it is *this* power which he has in view in this passage also. Jesus invariably "comes with water," wherever he comes with His Gospel. This is too frequently overlooked, or, at least, not held in sufficient consideration; yet it is nevertheless a most important fact, and an incomparable miracle. Wherever the Gospel finds a place, there, though it may not as yet produce real conversion and change of heart, it nevertheless creates a new moral world. We know, by experience, that no science, no philosophy, no human art, no, not even the law delivered on Mount Sinai, possesses this power. It is the exclusive privilege of the Gospel, that mirror of His glory who was the fairest among the sons of men. Compare, as you will, the circumstances of Christendom in our day, corrupted as it is by

infidelity, with the heathen nations of antiquity or of the present times, and you must perceive the immense moral chasm which separates them from us. How often do our missionaries, in their distant stations, assure us that, as seen from the human wilderness in which they dwell, Europe, despite its prevailing corruptions, appears to them like some terrestrial paradise? They deem that, however great the mass of impurity which the veil of secrecy may conceal from view, we are still “washed with water.” And are we not so, as regards our civil, municipal, and social regulations, our benevolent and charitable institutions, by which we reciprocally assist each other; as regards that body of morality which still reigns amongst us, and which none can grossly violate without incurring public censure; and, finally, as regards that social decorum to which each one must, at least outwardly, conform? Are we not so, also, in the homage which is involuntarily paid to all that is really noble? Nay, even in the very ambition to appear morally blameless and virtuous? In the shame, too, by which we are restrained, at least, from open sin; as well as in the severity with which, however pharisaically, we judge and condemn those who dare to outrage moral decorum? Yes; in all this, and in much more, a moral atmosphere still pervades our existence; and this can be ascribed solely to the power of the Gospel, which, even when we forsake it, does not therefore forsake us, but on the wings of memory recalling the impressions received in childhood, at school, or at confirmation, knows how to awaken the conscience of the most ungodly. This is the fruit of the secret working of Jesus Christ alone, who, however loud the cry may rage around him—“we will not have this Man to reign over us”—nevertheless cannot be expelled, but, commanding reverence by the majesty of His holiness, ever impresses Himself upon the conscience, whether clear or darkened, of the baptized multitude, as the sin-condemning and sanctifying ideal of all true human glory.

Oh, it cannot be told to what a vast extent Christ appears as the purifier and moralizer of humanity, even where He is known only in the outward message of His Gospel! Though no Mary Magdalene, no publican, or murderer, may as yet have embraced Him as their only comfort in life and death, He comes, nevertheless, with water, cleanses the outward robe, and quickens man’s moral consciousness. How many Christian communities in heathen lands, who as yet number but few truly converted and baptized members, nevertheless shine in morality, discipline, and order, with the splendor of a new creation, like a bright star in the human wilderness, simply because the doctrine of the Cross is there preached, and the glorious image of Immanuel is held up amongst them. The nearer we approach this doctrine and this image, the more powerfully will both the one and the other exert their purifying influence upon us. Read daily the Gospel in your families, and, even should none be truly converted by it, you will nevertheless marvel at the secret but irresistible influence which it brings to bear upon them. What a high moral tone at once breathes in music, painting, or any other branch of human art, when it approaches, in the selection of its subjects, even the confines of Christianity! How does the most trifling composer, as soon as he

adopts a Christian theme, assume, in this task at least, and before he is himself aware of it, a serious, elevated, chastened, and moral tone! Yes; all moral consciousness and all true morality in the world spring from Christ, and He brings both these blessings with Him, in a certain degree, wherever He appears and dispels the darkness.

Thus does he come “by water,” and this water, by which we understand His marvelously purifying power, supplants barbarism and licentiousness, establishing order and morality in their room, and witnessing for Him to this hour as the Messiah of God, who can do what none other can, carrying on the moral government of the world by His almighty fiat. Our present fallen world shouts, in its mad uproar, “Away with Jesus of Nazareth!” while, unwittingly, it bears in a thousand ways the marks of His sprinkling with water. Yes; those marks are borne by the criminal in his fetters, and, if in nothing else, surely in his conscience, cleansed, awakened, and enlightened by Christ and His Word, which secretly judges and condemns him; and which, however he may strive to stifle it, pronounces him a man doomed to the death of hell. None, not even he who in the slightest degree approaches the Lord of Bethlehem and of heaven, can withdraw himself altogether from those Divine influences which are signified in the text by the term “water.”

2. But yet, that Christ comes “by water” is but the least of His gifts. St. John shows this, in that impressive iteration, “not by water only, but by water and blood.”

By the blood, many commentators, as we have before observed, would understand the Lord’s Supper; and assuredly it does witness loudly of Jesus. And in many lands and districts, and places where the shepherds had become hirelings, the preachers rationalistic, lying prophets, and where the doctrine of the Cross had become almost forgotten, there has it, for many a long season, been the sole witness to a crucified Savior, proclaiming the doctrine of salvation by His blood, which, without this testimony, would have sunk into the grave of forgetfulness. Yes, insofar, also, does the Holy Communion testify for Christ, that the Lord therein evidently manifests Himself to the believing heart as the ever-present and omnipotent Savior. But nowhere else in the Holy Scripture is the Lord’s Supper simply called “the blood”; and I do not know why it, rather than baptism, should be called “the blood,” since baptism, by which we are planted in the likeness of the death of Christ, might as properly be called the blood; and the rather, since the element of water is, no less than the wine in the Lord’s Supper, an emblem of the blood of Christ.

By the blood, the Apostle in this passage un-questionably intends another power and agency of Christ, namely, His atoning power, which is, indeed, essentially different from that morally purifying agency signified by the water.

We are not yet pure before God, when the bare acquaintance with the Gospel, and the glorious ideal of the Savior which it places before us, have cleansed our outward man, awakened and quickened our moral consciousness, and led us into the paths of active virtue. On the contrary, the

more our conscience becomes enlightened as to the end of that holiness at which we are called upon to aim, the more thoroughly do we become aware of the immeasurable distance at which we still are from this goal. We are debtors to God, who have been weighed in the balances, and, as regards each single commandment, found wanting. Our iniquities stand as a barrier between us and the glorious majesty of God, and cry aloud to heaven for vengeance. If a just God sits on the throne of majesty, then all admission to His presence is forbidden to us transgressors. If He has really spoken from Sinai, then it is undeniably true that His Word condemns us. If those ten commandments, "Thou shalt," or "Thou shalt not," really sounded from His mouth, then their curse falls on our head. If He really said to Moses, "He that sinneth against Me, his name will I blot out of My book," then we may know what will befall us. Before the bar of His judgment seat we are lost. And were He at once to let mercy triumph over justice, then He would contradict Himself, and cease to exist as an absolutely perfect Being, cease—to be God! If our re-admission into our Father's house is possible at all, there must, before all, be a reconciliation between the holy God in heaven and sinners upon earth; and it was to accomplish this, by the priestly sacrifice of Himself, that Jesus Christ came. Glad tidings, indeed, for us! Not by water alone did Jesus come, but by water and blood. Behold Him in Gethsemane, at Gabbatha, above all, on the cross at Golgotha, how He came by blood, and listen to the testimony, first of John the Baptist, and then of His Apostles, who exalt Him above all as the Lamb slain, and as the Surety, who came with blood. In whatever manner He might have come, had He come without blood He would not have been the predicted Savior and Redeemer. His blood-shedding has, therefore, peculiarly witnessed to His Messiahship, and still continues to bear witness. It witnesses in heaven; for whenever a pardoned sinner is carried, amid the hosannas of the angels, into the heavenly Jerusalem, it is the saving power of His blood which is manifested in the ransomed heir of glory; and the mediatorial crown of Him who came "by blood" shines with renewed splendor. But this blood also witnesses on earth, and, God be praised, it does so in many places. It witnesses for Jesus by the wonders which it works in those who have been taught to accept it for themselves in faith. Look on this man. He is a sinner, even as other men. He knows it; he condemns himself, and fully and frankly declares himself amenable to the curse of the law. Yet, in the same breath in which he pronounces himself a child of wrath, he cries out with St. Paul, joy beaming in his countenance, "Who will accuse, who will condemn?" and casts himself with filial confidence into the arms of the Eternal Father. He no longer fears death, for its sting is taken away—nor the judgment, for his Surety appears there in his stead—nor hell, for it has lost its right over him; henceforth he enjoys a peace which makes the whole world as nothing to him, while love to Him who loved him even unto death, is shed abroad in his heart, rendering the hardest sacrifice light and easy, as soon as he knows that it is the Lord who demands it. Lo, such are the wonders which are wrought in the whole being of man by the blood of the Lamb, applied to the heart by a living faith. It renders him

energetic, cheerful, free, and courageous; and thus witnessing for Jesus, proclaims itself, in all its varied operations, as the blood, not of a man, but of the Son of God, the Lord of heaven. It is written of those saints, who are brought victorious out of the last antichristian struggle and received into eternal bliss, “They overcame him (that is, Satan) by the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 12:11). Yes, this blood, by the marvelous power which it exercises, by virtue of which men are lifted beyond themselves to a height of gladness, valor, and devotion to God, which makes them a spectacle of joy to angels—this blood glorifies the Lord Jesus even more than the water. Through the Holy Communion a re-newed and personal application of that blood is assuredly made, and so far it may be said that St. John had this sacrament in view; but, primarily, he undoubtedly intends by the blood, by which Jesus came and still comes, His atoning efficacy, which, by virtue of His finished sacrifice on the cross, will endure until the final consummation of all things.

3. There is a school of theology which prides itself in following a famous and gifted man—probably, well known to you—but who, in fact, only acknowledge Christ as He who came “by water.” They, indeed, talk much of the Spirit of Christ which rules in His Church, but they merely understand thereby the moralizing and purifying power which emanates from the sinless ideal of Christ’s humanity, as light and heat from the sun. Yet, even on account of this moral potency, they do not hesitate to call Him the King of kings—no, nor to set Him forth and glorify Him as the only Savior of the world. They earnestly urge the Christian Church not to lose sight of Him by day or night, but steadily to gaze upon His image with the eye of the soul. They expect the greatest blessings—even the moral renovation of the whole world—solely from the moral impulse which humanity receives from Him; and thus, at least, they are witnesses to the significance and importance of the truth that Jesus came by water, although we cannot but point out and condemn their view of this great truth as extremely partial and defective. In the same manner, there has ever and anon appeared in the church an equally one-sided teaching, though in a different direction, according to which the Savior came only by blood. This error meets us even in our own day. Its advocates rely upon the atoning sacrifice of Immanuel, but overlook His having come not by blood only, but by water and the Spirit. The appropriation of the blood is effected within the sphere of cold idealism, not in the innermost life of the mind. But an appropriation by which the man who trusts in the merits of Christ remains unchanged, the same as he ever was, is no reality.

Whoever would take Christ as his Savior and Redeemer, must accept Him wholly; accept Him, that is, as the Being who came not by water only, but also by blood; and not only by water and blood, but also by a third agent. How, do you ask, by yet a third? Yes, my brethren, and that an exceedingly glorious agent. What saith St. John? “It is the Spirit,” we hear him say, “which beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth.” In this case, would not the Holy Spirit be an agent distinct from the water? Yes, an essentially distinct agent. The influence proceeding from Christ

signified by the water, is a moralizing not a renewing influence; it ennobles, but it does not re-create. It awakens the conscience to perceive what is pleasing to God, but it does not impart the power of performing it. It enkindles the mind for the ideal of a life devoted to God, such as was exhibited in the Incarnate Savior, but it does not actually implant this life within us. Whoever has experienced only that power of Christ and His Word signified by “the water,” is, in spite of all the moral earnestness excited within him, neither dead to himself nor to the world. When brought to the test, it will at once be obvious that, despite all the show of virtue shed over the life, God has not yet obtained the empire of his heart, but the idols of this world still hold their sway—be they glory, pleasure, worldly possessions, or whatever else has hitherto ruled it. The Holy Ghost, on the contrary, does not content Himself with a mere moral stimulus. He does not merely arouse and ennoble the children of Adam, such as may be the fruit, in a natural way, of an earnest contemplation of the character of Jesus. The Holy Ghost works by a marvelous and creative energy—He renews. The new birth is His act, by virtue of which the selfishness of man’s heart is expelled, and pure love erected upon its throne; the love of the world expires in love to God, and, by the power of Divine grace, the desire of what is good, is enabled also to accomplish it. A life of the most sincere self-denial, the most childlike devotion to the Lord, and joyful running in the way of His commandments, is implanted by Him, and unfolds itself with increasing power and copiousness. This life frequently bears in the Holy Scriptures the name of Him who created it. It is called “Spirit.” “It is the Spirit,” says John, “who beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth.” In other words, whoever has become a partaker of the new life is convinced by the Holy Spirit, the blessed Comforter, that the new birth he has experienced is no illusion; neither is it a mere human change, but a real and miraculous work from on High, wrought in his inner man. Yet more, the Holy Ghost witnesses for Christ through the souls renewed by Him; for Him by whom the Spirit has been sent, and commissioned and empowered to accomplish this new creation. These new-born children whose life is after the Divine image, full of love, stand before the world as “living epistles” and letters of commendation, by whom He manifests to the whole world that He must be infinitely more than a poor child of humanity, since He constantly, and to this very hour, carries on the work of God upon earth. And, in truth, that new birth of a fallen child of Adam—born in selfishness and earthly mindedness—is a work done in Christ’s name, in virtue of His mediation, by the agency of the Holy Ghost, who does not merely ennoble man’s former self, but makes him a new creature—and this work is no less a miracle, and in no wise inferior to the creation of heaven and earth out of nothing. “The spirit,” I mean the renewed life and character of those that are in Christ Jesus, witnesses for the Spirit of Life in the strongest and most unequivocal manner. Here, then, we have the number of these holy and triune witnesses. What shall we now say, beloved brethren? Shall we ask, perchance, who it is that came and still comes by Water, Blood, and the Spirit? Shall we say, with John the Baptist, “Art Thou He that should

come, or look we for another?" Shall we hesitate to recognize Him as the Messiah, whose continued efficacy, as imparting moral purification, bringing peace and renewing the soul, is attested by such powerful witnesses? Shall we still doubt, whether salvation is to be found in another than in Him? Far, oh, far from us be such folly and such sin! Let the world judge of Him as it will; the poor blind world is utterly incapable of judging of Him. The world knows Him not, because it has never taken time seriously to attend to the testimony, loudly as it is given, of those three witnesses for Jesus—the Water, Blood, and the Spirit; and if it suspects, as it may and often does, who is that miraculous Being, Jesus of Nazareth—then it *will* not recognize Him, because a man coming with crowns, dignities and abundance is infinitely more congenial to its taste, than one whose only proclamation and commendation is that He comes by the Spirit, the Blood, and the Water. Let him who gives eternal condemnation the preference over eternal blessedness, follow the multitude, and chime in with the prevailing spirit of the times. Let him, on the other hand, who truly loves his own soul, and would assure himself of a life beyond the grave—yea, let him not delay, but surrender himself now, even today, to Him, who spake no idle word when he said, "No man cometh unto the Father but by Me." He is, and ever will be, the only Savior of the world. One must needs be blind, yea, more than blind, to mistake the seals which are set on the forehead of this our one and only Savior. O brethren, let me entreat you seriously to attend to this question of faith and conversion; for time hastens on apace, and you will attain, by God's grace, the power, not merely to repeat, as a vain form, the letter of this text, but of proclaiming, from your own blessed experience, "This is He that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth." Amen!

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