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Exposition of the First Epistle of St. John.

BY PROFESSOR THE REV. RICHARD ROTHE, D.D.

CHAPTER V. 6-8.

'This is He that came with water and blood, even Jesus the Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three who bear witness, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood; and these three agree in one.'

VER. 6. Regarding this faith in Jesus as the Christ, which he has just set forth as being the only world-conquering power (vers. 4 f.), John now shows that it rests upon a secure basis, viz. upon the witness of God Himself to Jesus (vers. 6-10 a.). He also points warningly to the fearful danger that is associated with the refusal of the faith in Jesus that is demanded. To refuse this faith, he says, is to make God Himself a liar, and to renounce eternal life. For the witness of God to Jesus is essentially a witness to the fact that God has given us eternal life, viz. in Jesus His Son, in whom alone it is, and through the possession of whom alone it can be possessed (vers. 11-21). In vers. 6 and 7, John states upon what basis the assurance is grounded that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah.

'This' refers back to Jesus, the subject of ver. 5, not to its predicate, 'the Son of God.' 'Jesus the Christ' is apposition to the whole of the preceding clause, 'Jesus' corresponding to 'this' and 'the Christ' to 'that came with water and blood.' The emphasis lies plainly upon 'the Christ.' 'With water and blood,' *i.e.* by means of, through water and blood. What is spoken of here as having been thus meditated is His coming, *i.e.* His appearing in the name of God, as the Ambassador of God, and that, too, in our room and stead, more particularly as Messiah. What is meant is, therefore, that water and blood legitimated, attested His divine mission, authenticated His Messiahship: He that came attested by water and blood.

'Water and blood' must certainly be taken symbolically. They must denote something that actually happened to Jesus, or something that He actually did, in which there lies a definite authentication of His Messiahship, and therefore something corresponding to the Old Testament predictions and to the current expectations of the 'coming one.' By means of the emphatic addition, 'not with the water only, but with the water and the blood,' John gives us to understand that

he is speaking of *such* facts in the life of Jesus as are actually apart, and have a certain independence of one another, and each of which, taken by itself, contains an element of the Messianic attestation; but which, nevertheless, only in their union with one another and with the 'Spirit' furnish the full authentication of the Messiahship of Jesus. It also seems as if John lays more stress upon the 'blood' than upon the 'water,' and indeed as if he does so in express opposition to another way of thinking, which attaches exclusive importance to the witness of the water. The *water*, as most of the expositors of the early Church (*e.g.* Tertullian) and of the age immediately after the Reformation hold, is the baptism of the Saviour Himself by John, at which He was expressly declared to the Baptist by God to be the Messiah (John i. 31-34), and at which God bore Him the testimony, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased' (Matt. iii. 17). It is probable that John thus briefly describes this baptism of Jesus simply as 'water' for the sake of the parallelism with 'blood.' We must not, with Lücke, de Wette, and many others, who appeal to Acts x. 47; Eph. v. 26; Heb. x. 22; Tit. iii. 5; 1 Pet. iii. 21; and John iii. 5 (which last passage is most in favour of their view), understand it of the baptism instituted by Jesus, as a symbol of moral cleansing and renewal. The circumstance that Jesus instituted baptism cannot possibly be regarded as an attestation of His Messiahship. Moreover, it could hardly be said of an institution of Jesus, 'He comes with,' etc.

It is even more evident that the 'blood' is a designation of the bloody atoning death of Jesus (*vid.* i. 7; Rev. i. 5, v. 9, vii. 14; 1 Pet. i. 2; Heb. ix. 19, 22 ff., x. 22, xii. 24). His atoning death is an authentication of His Messiahship, inasmuch as the propitiation of the sins of the world, by the surrender of His life to death, was definitely expected of the Messiah (this is at least the express presupposition of our author, iii. 5, John i. 29). In His atoning death, moreover,

there is involved a direct testimony of God Himself to the Messiahship of Jesus, inasmuch as by raising Him up from the dead God solemnly declared that He accepted the propitiation, offered by Him in His death, for the sins of the world. (In so far there is at least implied in the 'blood' the thought also of the resurrection of Jesus.) That John, in order to express these thoughts, uses the terms 'water and blood,' is probably due, not merely to the striving after brevity natural to so undialectical a writer, but also to the circumstance mentioned by himself in John xix. 34, 35, which he seems to regard as mysteriously significant. Owing to their personal intercourse with John, the readers of this Epistle were probably already familiar with the meaning of this terminology, which seems to be peculiar to him. The clause, 'not with water only,' etc., is meant to express the fact that John lays special stress upon the importance of the 'blood' in this matter of bearing witness to the Messiahship of Jesus. He is probably led to do so in opposition to the Jewish-Christian (in part also Gnostic) way of thinking, to which the baptism of Jesus was the really essential element, upon which they grounded their belief in His Messianic dignity and quality.

Ver. 7. Here two things have to be considered: first, what the thought is to which expression is given, and secondly, how this verse is related to the preceding. As to the thought expressed, it is evidently largely dependent upon the way in which we take the particle connecting the two clauses of which the verse consists. If we translate 'and the Spirit beareth witness *that* the Spirit is the truth,' we have a thought which is no doubt clear and correct in itself (the thought, viz., that the Spirit has in itself the immediate and absolute certainty of its truth and reality), but which does not fit in at all with the context. For that which is spoken of here as having witness borne in its favour is not the reality of the Spirit, but that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God (*vid.* also ver. 9). If, however, we translate, 'and the Spirit beareth witness, *because* the Spirit is the truth,' the clause fits in admirably with the context. It states the reason why the Spirit is able to bear valid, credible witness. The reason assigned, moreover, is literal truth. In virtue of its idea (as the absolute unity of thought and existence, of the ideal and the real), the Spirit alone is possessed of true being, of being in the full, absolute sense (John

iv. 24). Hence John writes, 'it is *the* truth,' *i.e.* the truth in general (not, with Lücke, 'the Christian truth in its whole extent'). Being thus the truth, the Spirit, which the Christian finds experimentally in himself, is the ultimate anchorage of his absolute certainty as to his Christian consciousness; and it is as such that John presents it here, in exactly the same way as we have already found him doing in other parts of the Epistle (iii. 24, iv. 13, ii. 20, 21, 27). The Spirit spoken of here is the Holy Spirit, which the believing Christian has received from God (iv. 13) and Christ (iii. 24), or which, more specifically, has been begotten in him in virtue of his being begotten of God. *This* Spirit is *actual* (not merely approximate) spirit. Hence John here, with perfect right, names it simply 'the Spirit,' and speaks of spirit as being possessed only by believing Christians, and not also by the unregenerate.

Seeing that this is the meaning of the verse, there cannot be any doubt as to the relation in which it stands to ver. 6. The Spirit is not set forth here as being a third element, *in addition to* water and blood, attesting the Messiahship of Jesus; it is rather represented as being an element that bears witness to the attestation given in the water and blood, an element that attests this attestation, and whereby this attestation acquires its power to convince. The expression, 'and it is the Spirit that beareth witness,' shows plainly that John does not regard the Spirit as being a third element in addition to water and blood, but rather as being the *only* element that bears witness. This is by no means contradicted by ver. 8, where the water and the blood are also expressly accounted witness-bearing elements. For, in virtue of the witness borne to them by the Spirit, these two attesting signs themselves become witnesses in the strict and full sense of the term. In themselves, however, they are not so; they become so only in virtue of the witness-bearing Spirit, as is implied also in the fact that in ver. 8 the Spirit stands first. The thought yielded by taking the clauses in this relation to one another has the most decisive analogy of Scripture in its favour. The peculiar office which the Saviour Himself assigns to the Holy Spirit is precisely this, to bear witness to Him as the Christ and the Son of God in an effective manner (John xv. 26, xvi. 7-11, 13-15, in which passages the key to this passage must be found). So also, according to Paul, it is

by means of the Holy Spirit that the Messiahship and Divine Sonship of Jesus is forcibly proved and made an article of living faith in the heart of man (Rom. i. 4; 1 Cor. xii. 3; 1 Tim. iii. 16).

Ver. 8. The words which the common text inserts between vers. 7 and 8 ('in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth') must be absolutely rejected. They are wanting in all the more important manuscripts. They were omitted by Luther in his translation, and found their way into some editions of it only a considerable time after his death. Exegetical reasons also are as decisively opposed to their authenticity. They break the connexion of the whole passage, which, as soon as they are removed, becomes perfectly clear. The 'for' with which the verse begins introduces the proof of the thought stated in vers. 6 and 7:—Jesus is well attested by the attesting elements mentioned in these two verses; these attesting elements really furnish a convincing authentication of the Messiahship of Jesus. John now shows this is the case by pointing to the fact that there are *three* of these legitimating witnesses (the number required before a human court, Deut. xvii. 6, xix. 15; Matt. xviii. 16), and indeed that there are three thoroughly harmonious witnesses. He means that, even regarded after a human manner, the testimony to which he appeals is worthy of credit; for it is borne by three witnesses who thoroughly agree.

The prophetic legitimation of Jesus by God is that by means of the water; while the blood is the propitiation of men's sins by Christ's death. Upon these two points John grounds the reality of the Messiahship of Jesus. In addition to the prophetic legitimation, he expressly gives prominence to the blood of Christ as being that which was of special importance. The faith which sees in Jesus only the Divine Ambassador and not also the Propitiator, he considers insufficient. From this we see that the tendency to limit the vocation of the Redeemer to the prophetic office was already manifesting itself. We are not, however, warranted in finding the legitimation of Jesus as Messiah only in His atoning death; for His prophetic manifestation, whereby He has revealed the Father to us, is the essential condition under which His atoning death can actually bring us salvation.

From these objective, external authentications of Jesus, John goes back to one that is inner and subjective, upon which, as their basis, the former are built, viz. to the witness of the Spirit to Jesus as the Christ. This witness is the immediate consciousness of the fact that this Jesus is He who should come; that in Him is given us the satisfaction of the needs of humanity. Still this witness does not depend upon our own rational reflection; it is a direct feeling, which we are unable to produce in ourselves, but which is wrought in us by God. In everything that belongs to our religious faith we must fall back upon this inner, immediate certainty; for here we can take our stand only upon a directly experimental certainty. This certainty, however, must not be isolated from the objective grounds of assurance; and hence John does not separate the witness of the Spirit from that of the water and the blood. But these objective grounds taken by themselves cannot give such an assurance as the Christian needs. We must, however, absolutely trust the witness of the Spirit, because the Spirit is truth. It is implied in the very idea of the Spirit, that it alone is in itself absolutely real being. To him to whom the thought of the Spirit is not truth, everything that we call assurance is of no validity; there is for him only the certainty that is derived directly through the senses. Few, however, are really consistent in this matter. Most men vacillate between the two standpoints; hence also the practical vacillation of most men between the sensible and the supersensible world. To gain this assurance, that Spirit is truth, is of the utmost importance to the man that thinks. This assurance alone gives thinking a meaning. But only the Spirit itself can witness to the fact that Spirit is truth; it is only the witness of the Spirit to itself, one's own experience of the reality of the Spirit in oneself, that makes this certain. To the Christian the assurance that the Spirit is truth is specially indispensable; for the new world, that has been disclosed to us in Christ, is wholly a world of the Spirit. The new life, to which we are begotten again in Christ, is in its inmost essence a life of the Spirit, and has the carnal life as its direct opposite. The entrance of Christianity into the world forms the great historical turning-point, at which the world of the Spirit that lies behind the sensible world has become a positive reality to man's consciousness, so that

his eye has been turned away from the transitory to the spiritual and eternal.

'And these three are for the one,' *i.e.* they converge, in the witness that they bear, on one and the same thing; they agree with one another, *viz.* in this, that Jesus is the Son of God. It is only too common an experience to find that those who lay stress upon the objective attestation of Jesus (upon the historical Jesus), and those who lay stress upon the spirit (upon the spiritual world which He has brought into existence), are opposed to one another. Those who are always insisting upon the spirit imagine too readily that

this spirit is hostile to the historical flesh, in which the Redeemer has entered within the circle of human vision. By refining the Redeemer into a pure idea, an abstraction, they think they guarantee and secure His spirit. But we have the spirit of the Redeemer and the world of the spirit in general only by means of His historical appearing. To understand the latter is truly to understand the Christian spirit. The more we lay stress at once upon the historical and upon the ideal in Christ, so much the purer and the more vigorous does our Christianity become.

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