

Competing Testimonies and Competing Gospels

1 John 5:6-12

A couple weeks ago I mentioned that I would be going to Mississippi to spend a week with my mom. I flew into New Orleans and my brother and I stopped in for some turtle soup; I'll be thinking about that for a long time! I had a great time abiding with my mom. We mainly sat and talked for several hours a day. I also helped with a few little projects around the house, but some of the projects required more time, tools, and skills than I had. So I asked my brother Mikey if he knew of a contractor that he trusted to do the work. He actually didn't, but he got a recommendation from a friend. Carlos came over to see the work that my mom needed done; he seemed very competent and conscientious. The next day he got us an estimate of what it would cost to do the work. His prices seemed reasonable, so he's going to do the work.

Generally speaking, that's how people commonly make decisions about products and businesses and services. You get recommendations (or testimonies) from people you trust/respect. I can remember a time when I needed something done at my house. I asked a trusted friend. He said, "You should have [this person] to do the work." "Do I need to get other bids/estimates?" "You can if you want. . . but you should have [this person] do the work." I trusted my friend, so that's exactly what I did (and it worked out great). We all make decisions based on recommendations/testimonies. The more credible the testimony, the more confident you are in believing them.

When John wrote the letter we now call 1 John, there were conflicting testimonies about Jesus. The testimony John had originally brought (see 1 John 1:2) was the gospel preached by all the apostles: Jesus is the Son of God who came in the flesh, showed us how to live, died as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Being fully God he was a ***sinless*** sacrifice; being fully human he could be a sacrifice for ***humanity***. Throughout 1 John, John repeatedly reminds them of the testimony they had heard "from the beginning" (e.g., 1 John 2:24). He assures them that if they believe in Jesus as the Son of God they will have eternal life.

But there were some who had left the church who brought a different testimony and a different gospel (see 1 John 2:18-27). They denied that Jesus is the Christ who had come in the flesh to die for our sins (see 1 John 2:22, 4:1-6) as John had taught. And they were trying to persuade John's readers to their view about Jesus.

In today's passage John tells his readers that they need to remain true to the gospel not only because of ***his*** testimony, but also because of ***God's*** testimony. And God's testimony about Jesus meets the highest standards of credibility and therefore warrants a response of faith.

What John writes here is just as relevant in our day as it was in John's. Today there are many conflicting testimonies about Jesus. There are many voices trying to convince people that Jesus isn't really the Son of God who came in the flesh to die for our sins. Rather, they would say, Jesus was exceptional in many ways, but he is merely one of

many good teachers; pay attention to him if you like, but don't trust your eternal destiny on his life and teachings.

As you know, believing something doesn't make it true. And not believing something doesn't make it untrue. Therefore, we need to make sure that what we believe or don't believe is based on the most credible testimony available. There's too much at stake to do otherwise. So let's listen to God's testimony about Jesus; then we'll consider our response to that testimony.

God's Testimony about Jesus. (1 John 5:6-9) Referring to Jesus, John writes:

6 This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.

Jesus came in two ways: by water and blood. This is a reference to Jesus baptism (at the first of his public ministry) and to Jesus' crucifixion (at the end of his time on earth). John adds that the Holy Spirit is the one who "testifies" about both of those events. Other Scriptures teach that the Holy Spirit testified about the ***validity*** and the ***significance*** of Jesus' baptism and crucifixion.

In this context, let's consider briefly both Jesus' baptism and Jesus' crucifixion. Before Jesus began his public ministry at age 30, John the Baptist (not the author of 1 John) had been baptizing people in the Jordan River a few miles outside of Jerusalem. John made clear that he wasn't the messiah; rather, he was preparing people for the messiah. That preparation involved calling people to repent and be baptized. Repentance involved turning away from their sins and turn back to God; being baptized was a visible expression of their repentance.

When Jesus showed up to be baptized, John was understandably reluctant to baptize him; if anything, John said, Jesus should baptize him. But Jesus insisted on being baptized by John because righteousness demanded that he identify with humanity in that way. Being without sin Jesus had no need to repent and be baptized. But as the Savior of the world, he had to identify with sinful humanity by being baptized. And so Jesus "came by water."

Listen to the way Luke recorded Jesus' baptism in Luke 3:21–22.

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

By descending upon Jesus in the form of a dove, the Holy Spirit testified and confirmed that Jesus would be led and empowered by God Himself. The voice of God also testified, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (a reference to Isaiah 42:1). From the very beginning of his earthly ministry Jesus had the public endorsement

of the Spirit and the Father. They could have given this endorsement privately, but they gave this public endorsement for the benefit of everyone who would hear the gospel, including us.

Jesus also “came by blood” at his crucifixion. As we’ve seen throughout 1 John, Jesus came in the flesh to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Jesus made clear to the disciples that nobody was taking his life from him (as if he were a passive victim); rather, he was laying down his life for the people (John 10:15, 17; 15:13).

The Spirit testified about the significance of the crucifixion in many ways. For example, we’re told that Jesus “was declared to be the Son of God in power” when the Spirit raised him from the dead (Romans 1:4). The resurrection validated everything Jesus said and did. As well, the Spirit inspired the writings/scriptures that we now call the New Testament which explain the significance of Jesus’ death.

John said in verse 6 that the Spirit is the One who testifies, and the Spirit is TRUTH. Therefore he never misleads us; he can be believed.

In verse 7 John add nuance to what he’s written:

7 For there are three that testify: 8 the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree.

John is likely referencing Deuteronomy 17:6 and 19:15 which say that a person can be convicted of an offense only when you have the testimony of two or three witnesses. In issues of life and death you don’t want to rely merely on a single witness; you want multiple credible witnesses. Since John is writing about the most consequential of all life and death issues - whether or not a person has eternal life - he points out that the Spirit and the water and the blood all testify; and they all three agree.

In verse 9 John makes a point from common, everyday experience.

9 If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son.

John’s point is that if we accept the recommendations of other people with credibility, we should certainly accept the recommendations of God because “the testimony of God is greater.” Through the Spirit, the water, and the blood, God is testifying that Jesus is the Son of God who came in the flesh and died as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

My question is, “Are you putting yourself in a position to receive ‘the testimony of God’? Or are you only positioned to receive the testimony of other people?” Of course the two aren’t necessarily in conflict, but you only know that if the primary testimony you’re receiving is that of God. And living almost 2,000 years after Jesus’ time on earth, the primary place we receive the testimony of God is through the Scriptures.

Perhaps the thought has crossed your mind that that puts us at a great disadvantage. We might tend to think, “If I had been there at Jesus’ baptism and seen the Holy Spirit descending like a dove I would believe. . . or if I had been there at the crucifixion and seen the sky turn dark and felt the earth shake, I would believe. Or even if I could have talked to John or Matthew or Mark and heard their firsthand accounts it would be much easier to believe.” Have you ever had any of those thoughts?

Jesus anticipated and understood all of this. In John 20 he told Thomas, “You believe because you’ve seen [the wounds in my hands and side]. Blessed are those who believe without seeing.” Jesus knew that very few people would be eye-witnesses of his earthly life, death, and resurrection. His provision was to send the Holy Spirit who would give the apostles accurate recall and would teach them the truth of what they had experienced. They (and a few others close to them) wrote the documents that now form our New Testament (e.g., 1 John). We receive the testimony of God as we abide in this “word of God” and allow the Holy Spirit to teach us.

Since God’s testimony about Jesus meets the highest possible standards of credibility, we should listen to and receive that testimony.

Our Response to God’s Testimony about Jesus. (1 John 5:10-12) In these three verses, John talks about two different responses.

10 Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son.

As we’ve seen throughout 1 John, “believing in the Son of God” isn’t some cold, sterile affirmation of a set of facts about Jesus. Believing in Jesus is ***wholehearted trust*** that Jesus became one of us in order to die for our sin. Consequently, those who believe in the Son of God experience something so miraculous that it changes them internally; they become a new creation in Christ and God makes his home within them through the person of the Holy Spirit. The testimony about Jesus is no longer something “out there” (i.e. outside of them) but something “in here,” (i.e., within them): “Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself.” You have an internal witness about the truth of the gospel.

In the second sentence in this verse John makes a bold statement about those who reject the gospel: “Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar.” In other words, not believing that Jesus is the Son of God is tantamount to accusing God of lying. For John (and the other apostles), the gospel isn’t one of many valid opinions about the person and work of Jesus. For John, the gospel is the truth about Jesus that God had verified by the Spirit, the water, and the blood. God had not been vague or unclear; He had testified decisively about his Son. Therefore, “not believing” the gospel is to reject the testimony of God concerning his Son.

In verse 11 John restates the testimony of God about Jesus.

11 And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.

For sake of word flow, English translations render the middle clause, “God gave us eternal life.” But the sentence in Greek places “eternal life” at the beginning for emphasis. The sense would be: “**Eternal life!** That’s what God gave us!” The same quality of life that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have enjoyed from all eternity - that’s what God gave us! We didn’t take it or earn it; God gives us eternal life when we believe. Therefore:

12 Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

The two go together. If you have the Son you have life; if you do not have the Son you do not have life. Therefore, receive the testimony God has given concerning his Son and experience life.

Let me urge upon you two points of application:

First, receive God’s testimony about Jesus in the Scriptures. Abide in God’s word week in and week out. Not only because you’re **supposed to** (and you are supposed to; both testaments place great stress on this [Psalm 1, John 15, Colossians 3, etc.], but also because your faith depends on receiving the testimony of God. This week when you go to Scripture, go hungry and teachable. Over time God will deepen your convictions about Jesus.

Second, build the faith of others. Testify to them; talk about what you’re experiencing in your walk with God and what God is teaching you through Scripture. This is one of the core ways that we love one another in the body of Christ. The book of Hebrews stresses this repeatedly. In Hebrews 3:12-13 we read:

12 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Do you see how we are supposed to look out for each other so that none of us have “an evil, unbelieving heart.” There may be someone very close to you who are on the verge of giving up their faith. It usually doesn’t happen all of a sudden; it’s usually a gradual process (Hebrews 2 speaks of “drifting away from” the gospel). We’re charged to exhort/plead with one another to remain faithful to Christ. We’re not nagging each other or getting angry at each other. We’re pleading with each other out of compassion.

One final thought: If we’re receiving God’s testimony about Jesus and we’re testifying to one another, we’re in a position to bear witness to our friends who don’t yet know Christ. Again, we don’t bear witness only because we’re supposed to; we also bear witness because we are passionate about others experiencing the life that God offers in Christ.