

Faith Conquers the World

5 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ^[a] has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. ²By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, ⁴for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. ⁵Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

Testimony concerning the Son of God

⁶This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth. ⁷There are three that testify:^[b] ⁸the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree. ⁹If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. ¹⁰Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God^[c] have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. ¹¹And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹²Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

Epilogue

¹³I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

¹⁴And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. ¹⁵And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him.

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1 John 5

“Our Testimony”

Testimony. In a court setting, testimony is the statement of a witness given under oath. The statement may include presenting evidence about the circumstances of the case, professional observations about the people involved in the case, or an eyewitness account of what happened. The outcome of a court case usually rests on the believability of the testimony. Yes, testimony should be all about the facts, but even the facts are filtered through imperfect human beings with selective memories, and occasionally unreliable or even fabricated accounts. Nevertheless, testimony is sometimes the best that we have to go on. It attempts to tell the most relevant details of the story, and such stories are the ways in which we interpret what goes on in our lives.

Religious testimony shares a few things with its legal counterpart. Religious testimony comes from witnesses to the faith. And though an oath may not be required, it is likely presumed that the person giving his or her testimony to the faith is bound by the understanding that they are to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help them God. Testimonies to the faith are the telling of our stories, again the stories that interpret what is going on, this time in our spiritual lives.

This passage speaks about religious testimony in the following seven ways:

- 1) The Spirit testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.
- 2) These three testify – spirit, water, and blood - and all must agree.
- 3) God’s testimony is greater than human testimony.
- 4) Those who believe in the Son of God have testimony in their hearts.

- 5) Those who don't believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony God has given concerning his Son.
- 6) The testimony is this: That God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.
- 7) Whoever has the Son has life; whoever doesn't, doesn't.

But maybe it would serve us well to pause and consider what is meant by these statements from First John in light of thinking about the implications of "testimony." What is right or fair in judging spiritual testimony? Well, testimony in a court of law has particular standards for keeping it fair. You've probably heard of most of them. Testimony can't be based on using misdirecting questions; it can't be obtained through argumentative means; the same question can't be asked over and over again; it can't be speculative or based upon hearsay; it can't be given by a witness incompetent to answer the question at hand; it can't be derived through questions intended to be inflammatory; it can't be demanded of a witness who has a professional reason not to divulge the information; and irrelevant information can't be used to sway the testimony. Lawyers can make "objections" to the testimony for any of those reasons. It's a fairly complicated process to execute. In religion, we've not been very good at raising our objections and making our case solid. Therefore, we've had an "anything goes" way of allowing religious testimony to mean whatever the witness wanted it to mean, rather than having some standards by which to judge whether or not a religious statement of "the truth" really has any actual bearing in the truth.

So, leave it to First John to help us out. Though it may take some effort to get at First John's criteria for determining authentic religious testimony, I think it could be helpful to us today in sifting genuine religious testimony from false testimonies of a variety of sorts.

Let's take his criteria statement by statement and see what we can figure out.

1) The Spirit testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.

Just as in the beginning where First John says that God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, here, the letter writer characterizes the Spirit as truth. They are one in the same.

Therefore, religious testimony will always be brutally honest. If you are hearing religious testimony and something doesn't smell quite right about it, I can guarantee that it's coming from somewhere other than the Spirit.

The arguments that get made to justify things that just aren't true eventually get broken down and dismantled, even when they have long histories to go with them. Christians over the years have argued for the moral acceptance of slavery, and the right to gain information by torture, and they have defended the excesses of greed and war as part of God's favor bestowed upon the powerful. But the good news is that those arguments are ultimately impossible to defend even if they are permitted in certain times and places. When the Spirit gets honest with us about our propensities toward malice and violence, we follow toward a greater understanding of God's peace.

In social structures, we have also been taught to put greater value on certain human characteristics, like whiteness and masculinity and heterosexuality to the wounding of people of color, and women, and those with differing sexual or gender identities. Those hierarchies have been based upon untrue information. We are waking up to these untruths as the Spirit calls us to recognize the love God has for ALL people. As the Spirit moves us toward truth, we realize that the criteria God uses for judgment comes from a place of love – and won't be determined by where we find ourselves in these cultural hierarchies of who gets to call themselves first or last.

2) These three testify: spirit, water, and blood, and all must agree.

My interpretation of this criteria for testimony takes us to our religious practices as followers of Christ. How do our religious practices of listening for the spirit, baptizing in the water, and communing together in the body and blood of Christ agree? We testify to our faith by living out our faith in community. Our practices of Word and Sacrament, belief and action are all meant to go together. Putting together a healthy practicing faith community takes effort to unify our witness. I think that First John is reminding us here that what we do as a church together is our testimony to those who are watching what we do as outside observers. This could be said of Ashland Presbyterian Church, or the Presbyterian Church USA, or of Christianity as a whole I gather. We testify through the practice of our religion to who we understand the living Christ to be.

3) God's testimony is greater than human testimony.

So, what qualifies as God's testimony as opposed to human testimony? The Bible? Creation? Things we cannot even begin to understand? Maybe all of these things. Holy writings are both divine and human, and we try our very best to sort out what we can of God's influence apart from human influence on those writings. The created world and all that is in it speaks to God's handiwork, and yet, human influence on that world has caused great damage to our planet. And it's always appropriate, I think, to be able to say that there will always be things obscured to us about God. God remains a great Mystery to us. But to say that God's testimony is greater than human testimony makes sense to me. God has a much bigger frame of reference than I do!

The next four criteria I would put into sets of two, couplets of text that go together and compliment each other.

- 4) Those who believe in the Son of God have testimony in their hearts.
- 5) Those who don't believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony God has given concerning his Son.

In the very beginning of this reading, First John puts together faith and obedience as a precursor to telling us about what this “testimony” is going to mean. They are so intertwined for the writer that you can't really have one without the other. So, if you believe in Christ, the Son of God, it will be written all over your heart. This takes me back to one of my favorite texts from Jeremiah where God promises to make a new covenant with the Exiles as they return to their homes. God says: ³³ *But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.* ³⁴ *No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*

When we are “in Christ” our hearts believe. Our actions follow. So, if we are not believing – according to First John – we make God a liar. That part I find disturbing. I'm not sure we get to make God a liar by anything that we do, no matter how bad. It may mean that if our hearts are not in the right place, and our actions stray terribly from God's law, that we make God “look like” a liar, especially if we are claiming to be people of faith – but not acting much like it. How often have I heard it said by someone that they don't even want to call themselves “Christian” anymore because so many Christians seem fake or hypocritical, or like downright terrible people! That may be what this letter means by saying that when we don't believe in God (for real, and in our hearts, and according to what has been made knowt to us about Jesus) THEN we make god out to be a liar.

6) The testimony is this: That God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.

7) Whoever has the Son has life; whoever doesn't, doesn't.

The last couplet of what this religious testimony means is to announce that the purpose of it all is to convince us that the promise is real: God gives us eternal life through his Son. Case closed.

This testimony, all of it, is to reveal the glory of the resurrection. Death has been conquered. It is no longer the final outcome for humankind. For those of us who trust in the Triune God, LIFE is the purpose of all religious testimony, right? We are to live as though life is eternal, abundant, and blessed. When we have Jesus, this is the only thing we can do; and when we don't have the Son's story to go by, life becomes short, fragmented, and scary.

Recapping... when we tell our religious story, and give our testimony to what we believe, here's what it should include, according to First John.

It must be true. The Spirit can only speak in truths.

It must be reflected in our practices. How we practice our faith matters.

It must tell God's story as much as possible, free from human distractions.

It must be present in our hearts and shown in our actions.

It must lift up LIFE, eternal life, abundant life, as God's greatest gift to us. That's our story's final answer.

And that, my friends brings us to the end of this Biblical letter. In Epilogue, John writes: ¹³ *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.* ¹⁴ *And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.* ¹⁵ *And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him.*

Tell your story, your religious truth. Practice your faith. Love God in your heart. And live life to the very, very fullest. You may be bold in Christ and know that you will be heard. Amen.