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Homiletical Helps on LSB Series B—Epistles Easter 6 • 1 John 5:1–8 • May 10, 2015

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Homiletical Helps on LSB Series B—Epistles

Easter 6 • 1 John 5:1–8 • May 10, 2015

John's logic here regarding the relationship between *faith*, *love*, and *testimony* is straightforward: (1) God-born *faith* in Jesus as the Christ and the divine Son (2) is to be exhibited as Christ-like *love* toward God and neighbor (3), and such faith rests upon and is renewed by the truthful, consistent *testimony* of the gospel. That is to say, this firmly-attested *testimony* so strengthens our *faith* in the joyous news of Jesus's coming and sacrifice for us that we gladly live out his commandment to *love* both God and man.

These are not just nice ideas. Jesus came in the *flesh* (1 Jn 1:1–2; 4:2; Jn 1:14). His *blood* cleanses us from sin (1 Jn 1:7). Guided by the Spirit, the apostles were eye-witnesses to Jesus's coming (1 Jn 1:3; cf. Acts 10:36–42), including the “blood and water” which flowed from his corpse at Calvary (Jn 19:34–35). This consistent, unified, truthful, Spirit-born witness continues today in the real-life preaching of this apostolic gospel and in the water and blood of Christ's sacraments. The single message is this: Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, died, and risen again in love for the world, to atone for the sins of the whole world, and to give us eternal life! Such massive love raises us to a new life of love for God and for our neighbor, as God wills and commands.

Truthful testimony, certain faith, and active love could provide the three parts of a sermon on this text, beginning with vv. 6–8 (testimony), and working backward to vv. 4–5 (faith in Jesus) and vv. 1–3 (love). This gospel sequence could be prefaced by calling hearers to acknowledge and repent of their own lack of love. In this, the story of James and John from Luke 9:52–56 might provide a helpful beginning. How different John and his brother once were from the gospel goals expressed in this text—and, often, how different are we! Alternatively, the example of Jesus's own love could be lifted up as God's intention for humanity, focusing either on the culminating self-sacrifice of his passion (Jn 15:12–13) or the summation of his earthly life in Acts 10:38, which proclaims that Jesus went about “doing good” (εὐεργετῶν, “good-working”). How short we fall! Yet consider again how God has attested to us the person, work, and love of Jesus. Rejoice once again in this Savior. Hear once again the call of the Spirit in the apostolic gospel, in your baptism, and in the Lord's Supper—the call to the new life of love!

Love. The theme of Christian love was introduced in v. 1, and vv. 2–3 tie this love closely to God's commandments. Yes, such love is spontaneous, mirroring the Father's own love for us (1 Jn 3:1–2; 4:9–12, 16, 19) and, especially, the ultimate love shown by Jesus's self-sacrifice for us on the cross (1 Jn 3:16). Nevertheless, such love is still commanded by God (1 Jn 3:23; 4:19–21). This love for God and for our brother is no new commandment; it is the command given from the beginning and expounded in the OT commandments of God (2 Jn 5–6; Mt 22:36–40). At the same time, the bright light of divine love is now shining in the world in a new way, in a new age, since the coming-in-flesh and self-sacrifice of Jesus, so that God's command for Christians to love is also new (1 Jn 2:7–8; cf. Jn 13:34 and the Gospel reading for this Sunday, Jn 15:9–17). Verse 3

closes with the assurance that such commandments are not βαρῦς (ESV: “burdensome”), which contrasts with Matthew 23:4, where the scribes and Pharisees wield the law in order to “tie up heavy (βαρῦς) burdens and put them on men’s shoulders.”

Faith. The opening ὅτι-clause (“For . . .”) explains why God’s commandments to love are not burdensome: their fulfillment flows from faith, and this faith (a) is born of God, (b) overcomes the hatred and hating ways of the world (cf. Rom 12:20–21), and (c) is founded squarely on Jesus Christ himself, the Son of God. These verses repeat the notion of victory and overcoming, three times using the verb νικάω and the noun νίκη (cf. the athletic brand). Νικάω is used frequently by John in the NT (for example, Jn 16:33; 1 Jn 2:13–14; 4:4; Rv 2:7; 3:21; 12:11; 21:7). Earlier in his epistle (1 Jn 3:23), John has paired God’s command to *love* with his command to *believe* in the name of his Son Jesus Christ; indeed, faith in Christ comes first and is the font and foundation of Christian love.

Testimony. These verses accent the reliability and the physicality of the testimony regarding Jesus as the come-in-flesh Christ. The reference to the testimony of the Spirit refers primarily to the public preaching of the apostles, the authorized eyewitnesses to Jesus, and to the preaching of those in fellowship with them and in concurrence with their testimony of Christ (see 1 Jn 1:1–4, and especially 4:1–6). The apostolic preaching about Jesus is no mere human message, but rather the testimony of God himself concerning his Son and the eternal life found in him (1 Jn 4:6; 5:9–12; Acts 10:39–42). And God is true and truthful (1 Jn 5:20). Also, the Spirit-directed apostolic testimony is self-consciously founded upon the Spirit’s previous testimony to Christ in the prophetic Scriptures of the OT (Acts 10:43), which Jesus declares to be the Father’s witness regarding his Son (Jn 5:37–40).

The pairing “water and blood” is repeated three times in these verses. The verbal and thematic echo of John 19:34–35 in this pericope is unmistakable: “But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe.” Yet the emphasis here in 1 John 5 is not only on the testimony *about* the blood and water of Jesus’s pierced side, but also on the testimony *given by* “the water and the blood.” Writing to early Christian congregations, John’s language evokes the testifying roles of the sacraments: baptismal *water* and the new *testament* in Christ’s *blood* in the Eucharist. The testimony of “the water and the blood” is mentioned “so that we might think not only of the tokens of our redemption *then* but also of God’s appointed means for delivering that same redemption to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness *now*.”¹ Set alongside the Spirit-guided, apostolic preaching of Christ, there are thus “three” witnesses. Yet, these three witnesses εἰς τὸ ἓν εἰσιν (literally, “are into one/oneness”; ESV: “agree”). These three witnesses bear a consistent, unified testimony. Many Lutheran hymns rejoice in this rich testimony, most notably the hymn “Water, Blood, and Spirit Crying” (LSB 597).

The KJV and NKJV include a textual variant, an extra clause (sometimes called the Johannine Comma) inserted in vv. 7–8 which applies the “three-in-one” dynamic of this passage to the heavenly Trinity of Father, Word, and Holy Spirit, as well as to

the Spirit, water, and blood witnessing on earth. While this addition would be the fullest expression of Trinitarian doctrine in the Bible, it does not appear in any Greek NT manuscripts before the Middle Ages,² is not essential to the flow of John's thought in this passage, and should be set aside in preaching on this text (as the ESV does).

Thomas Egger

Endnotes

¹ Bruce Schuchard, *1–3 John* Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 537, author's emphasis.

² *Ibid.*, 512.