

Believe in the Son

1 John 5:(6-8) 9-13

⁹ If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. ¹⁰ Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. ¹¹ And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

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.

"Testimony, testify"—these words in our world carry connotations primarily associated with courtrooms and congressional hearing rooms, and watching C-SPAN on cable. This week political junkies got to view the hearing for the candidate to be the new C.I.A. director. Before giving testimony, witnesses must swear that they will tell "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." They offer evidence, via prepared statements or as prompted by attorneys. The accuracy, completeness, and relevance of their testimony is subsequently subjected to challenges, either from opposing attorneys or from "questions" (long-winded!) posed by congressional committee members. All involved are assumed to have a particular angle of vision, if not an outright agenda (except for judges and juries, who are charged with being impartial). The testing of a witness involves probing for inconsistencies, discrepancies, prejudicial stances and interpretations. The gauntlet through which witnesses are run is important because the stated objective of such proceedings is "objectivity"—the facts as such, independent of the perceptions held by those who have been called to give testimony.

The author of 1 John says: "There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree." Testimony from God is more to be trusted than any human testimony, the author continues. Clearly, we have not been convened in a

conventional "hearing room." And those who are addressed by this curious testimony are not conventional questioners either. "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God," says John, "so that you may know that you have eternal life." Objective evidence to persuade the uninformed and undecided is not on offer in this hearing room, apparently; rather, we are given evocative images of intimate relationship that, stirring deep memory, will (hopefully) awaken fading senses of assurance and energize fresh affirmations of a deep connection. This "witness" is God the Lover gently, but firmly enjoining: "Recall our relationship—its history, its tangible particularity. Remember how I have sustained and transformed you as a community of faith. Allow an awareness of divine love to reengage you.

That may seem, from the vantage point of courtrooms and hearing rooms, nothing more than inappropriate special pleading. But what can anyone deeply in love offer as proof to those who are distanced, estranged, suspicious, contentious, other than to make an appeal for recollection: "We have done these things together; I have gladly given up this and that so you might thrive and grow; I have been right with you—in good times and in bad." If the language of actions, continual and shared, does not serve as validation, what other words (regardless of how objective) could possibly suffice? And if what is on trial is Love itself, how could any evidence ever possibly "demand" a verdict? Love operates in a healthy intimate environment where compelling "must's" have no place. **David J. Schlafer**

In our scripture "human testimony" is compared to God's testimony (v. 9). If we believe the former, whether or not it is only gossip, why would we deny God's greater Word? In this passage, the writer of 1 John is picking up the Gospel of John's opening declaration, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). The truth of God's testimony is: God gives us eternal life through God's Son (v. 11). We can believe this or deny it.

This passage is not, of course, the first time truth and bearing witness have come up. Shortly after Jesus said he was the "light of the world" and was accused by the religious community of bearing untrue witness to himself, he proclaimed to those who believe, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (8:12, 32). Later, he said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (14:6). *All* this reached a climax in Jesus' arrest and trial, with his last words to Pilate, "For this I was born . . . to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (18:37). We cannot help but hear Pilate's haunting retort, "What is truth?" (18:38). Although the truth of God's love is no easier to describe and verify today than centuries ago, 1 John offers an answer to Pilate.

The Son is the testimony of God in the flesh. Jesus is the greater witness in the midst of the witnesses. Yet the Son is also the lowliness and humiliation of divine witness, its absolute weakness. The Son, who drank our dirty water, walked our dusty roads, and slept where we sleep, needed the testimony of God. The Son, whose witness was challenged, contradicted, and judged, depended on God's confirming testimony. Jesus lived our human weakness, and from within the realities of our weakness he prayed, believed, and sought the vindication of God for his life. As Karl Barth so forcefully argued, the Son entered the "far country" of our existence, facing our greatest fears—suffering and death.

The Son brought to us eternal life. This is his testimony, and it is also the testimony of God. The Son overcame death from within the space and time that death claimed as its own, our space and our time. All who believe in the Son have the testimony of God at work in their lives. Indeed, our testimonies to Jesus Christ participate in this living testimony of God in his Son. This joining of testimonies is a gift brought to us by the incarnate life of God. This joining of testimonies also creates a powerful reality of inclusion. Our witness, joined to the witness of the Son, becomes a word of eternal life. Even the writing of the elder's humble letter

participates in that witness, just as our words and deeds may show forth the life of the Son. **Willie James Jennings**

Traditions vary greatly over the degree to which testimony plays a role in Christian life. Many congregations do not practice testimony, at least not self-consciously, in part for fear of inappropriately imposing beliefs on others. Other communities keep it at the heart of their practice. The Church of Latter-day Saints teaches children to witness almost as soon as they can stand and talk, first to those in their own age group and then as part of their initiation into the wider community. In many African American congregations, testimony occupies a major place in worship. Preachers and laity tell others how God has changed their lives. Testimony, observes Thomas Hoyt, a bishop in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, is based in part on the location and experience of marginality. It has functioned as a means of catharsis and healing. Burdens are shared. Assurance of God's word is received. In testimony, "people speak truthfully about what they have experienced and seen, offering it to the community for the edification of all."

Some of us feel more comfortable showing our belief in the Son by concrete acts of compassion: by serving meals at Carriage Town Ministries, by giving food to the South End Soup Kitchen, by our support of Church World Services, offerings to week of Compassion, volunteering with Communities without Borders or Doctors without Borders, or making a call or sending a card to a member who is not able to attend worship on a regular basis. These are all ways that we give our testimony of what a difference God has made in our lives. This also testifies to faith in the promise of life—life given eternally through God in Christ's love alive in the world. **Bonnie Miller-Mclemore**

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