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## IS CHRISTIANITY MERELY PSYCHOLOGICAL?

1 John 5:6-13

By

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## Is Christianity Merely Psychological? 1 John 5:6-13

Skeptics frequently allege that Christian conversion is merely a psychological phenomenon that can be explained in purely naturalistic terms. In this view, conversion to Christ is a purely subjective experience. It's nice if it works for you, but you shouldn't try to impose it on everyone else or say that those who do not believe as you do are wrong.

If you say that Jesus Christ changed your life, the skeptic will reply, "That's great for you, but it doesn't prove that Christianity is true for everyone else. Buddhism changed Richard Gere's life. Scientology changed Tom Cruise's life. Cabalistic Judaism seems to have changed Madonna's life. So if you want to look at changed lives, there is plenty of evidence that Christianity is not the only religious truth out there."

How do you counter such arguments? There is value in subjective, inner assurance of the truth of the gospel for believers. But we need a more sure foundation for our faith than our subjective experience alone provides.

Throughout 1 John, the apostle has been addressing the matter of authentic Christianity. False teachers had caused confusion in the church and had left, taking a number of people with them. They claimed to have secret knowledge about Jesus Christ, but their teaching contradicted the apostolic witness to Christ. John repeatedly shows that authentic Christians believe the truth about Jesus Christ, they obey God's commandments, and they love one another. He began the letter by affirming the certainty of what the apostles knew about Jesus Christ (1:1-3):

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to

you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His son Jesus Christ.

John wasn't relaying some inner, subjective vision or philosophy. He was telling about his objective experience with Jesus Christ. You can't get much more objective than seeing, hearing, and touching! Jesus Christ is God's witness to us through the apostles who spent three years with Him. In our text, John comes back to this objective witness with which he opened this letter. He wants us to have a sure foundation for our faith. Authentic Christian faith rests on God's testimony to the person of Jesus Christ.

Believing God's trustworthy witness to His Son  
gives us a sure foundation for our faith.

In 5:6-9, John shows that God has given a trustworthy threefold witness to His Son. Then in 5:10-13, he shows that believing God's witness to His Son gives us a sure foundation for our faith, with the aim (5:13) "that you may know that you have eternal life."

1. God has given a trustworthy threefold witness to His Son (5:6-9).

Regarding verses 6-8, Martyn Lloyd-Jones states (*Life in God* [Crossway], p. 68), "Now there can be no question at all but that these three verses are not only the most difficult verses in this epistle, but I think ... that they are the three most difficult verses, in a sense, in the entire Bible!" I could find other verses that are much more difficult than these, such as Hebrews 6:4-6! But his point is well taken, that these are difficult verses. First, we must deal with the textual problem and then, with the interpretive problem.

*The Textual Problem:* The textual problem is that the New King James Version (and the KJV) reads as follows (5:7-8): "For there are three who bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one." It is certain that the phrase beginning with "in heaven" (5:7) through "on earth" are not a part of John's original letter and should be omitted. There are no Greek manuscripts with this additional phrase before the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It comes from a marginal comment that was incorporated into the text of an

Old Latin 5<sup>th</sup> century manuscript. (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], pp. 129-130 gives a full account of this.) The original text is accurately represented in the New American Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, and the New International Version.

*The Interpretive Problem:* The more difficult problem is to determine what John means by his reference to “the water and the blood” (5:6) and to “the Spirit and the water and the blood” (5:8). It is certain that John is establishing the historical factualness of the incarnation and earthly ministry of Jesus Christ and citing God’s testimony to substantiate it. In Jewish thought, a point is confirmed in a court of law by the testimony of two or three witnesses. John here brings forth three witnesses that agree that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He also seems to be refuting the false teachers by using expressions that were already familiar to his readers, but which are not so readily understood by us. Hence the difficulty of interpreting these verses.

There have been four main interpretations (On views 1, 2, & 4, I’m following John Stott, *The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], pp. 177-178; I think he misrepresents Calvin’s view, as does James Boice, *The Epistles of John* [Zondervan], p. 163). (1) Some understand the water and the blood as a symbolic reference to the sacraments of baptism and communion. This was Luther’s view and several commentators say that it was Calvin’s view. But it is not Calvin’s view, which I will explain in a moment. This view is unlikely for two reasons. First, while water may well stand for baptism, blood would be an unusual symbol for the Lord’s Supper. John would not likely omit a reference to Christ’s body if he meant the Lord’s Supper. Second, John says that Jesus *came* by water and blood, which points to His past historical coming, not to any ongoing spiritual coming through the sacraments.

(2) Some link this passage with John 19:34-35, where John testifies to the blood and water that flowed from the spear wound in Jesus’ side. Augustine and some other ancient commentators held this view. At first glance it seems logical since John wrote both passages. Both texts emphasize the water and the blood, and both emphasize the idea of testimony.

But the similarities are not so close upon further examination. In 1 John, Jesus came by water and blood, whereas in the Gospel,

it was blood and water that came out of Jesus. In 1 John, the water and blood bear witness to Jesus, whereas in the Gospel, John bears witness to the blood and water. In 1 John, the water and blood seem to bear witness to Jesus' divine-human person, whereas in the Gospel, the blood and water bear witness to Jesus' human death, and perhaps to the salvation provided by it.

(3) A third approach is that of John Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], pp. 256-257). C. H. Spurgeon seems to have followed Calvin here (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Ages Software], sermon 3252, "By Water and by Blood"). Calvin viewed the terms as referring to the Old Testament rites of purification and blood sacrifice, which Jesus Christ fulfilled in His earthly ministry. Thus, as Spurgeon explains (*ibid.*), "By the terms 'water' and 'blood' we understand the purifying and the pardoning effects of Christ's work for his people."

While this is true on a secondary level, I do not think that it is John's primary meaning. He is setting forth facts that establish God's testimony to the person and work of Jesus Christ as historically revealed. While Jesus' person and work do cleanse us from sin and pardon us, those are not the historic facts to which John is directing his readers in order to refute the heretics.

(4) Thus the most satisfactory interpretation takes water as a reference to Jesus' baptism (at the outset of His earthly ministry) and blood as a reference to His death on the cross. This was Tertullian's view (c. 160/170-c. 215/220). It is the best view because in the context, John is emphasizing the historical foundations of the faith. Both His baptism and the cross are historic experiences that bear witness to Jesus' divine-human person. At each of these events, the Father intervened in a miraculous way to bear testimony to His Son. At Jesus' baptism, the Spirit descended on Him as a dove and the voice from heaven declared (Matt. 3:17), "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased." At His crucifixion, the sky was darkened, the earth quaked, numerous resurrections took place, and the veil in the Temple was torn from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51-53).

This interpretation also fits with what we know of the historical setting of 1 John. The Cerentian Gnostics, whom John refutes throughout the letter, taught that Jesus was a mere man upon

whom “the Christ” descended at His baptism and from whom “the Christ” departed before His death. These false teachers could not conceive of how a divine Savior could have died on the cross. To refute this serious heresy, John shows that Jesus was the Christ (God’s Anointed) before His baptism, where that fact was authenticated by the Spirit. “Came” implies that He came to earth from heaven. Since the Gnostics agreed that Jesus was the Christ at His baptism, John adds (5:6b), “not with the water only, but with the water and the blood.” This is to say that He was the Christ during and after His crucifixion.

Then John adds (5:6c-8): “It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.” As mentioned, the Holy Spirit bore witness to Jesus at His baptism and at His death. Spurgeon (*ibid.*, “The Three Witnesses,” #1187, p. 552) points out that in Leviticus 8, when the priests were consecrated, they were washed with water, anointed with oil (a type of the Holy Spirit), and the blood of a sacrificial ram was applied to their ear, thumb, and toe. Even so, Jesus our great High Priest was washed with water at His baptism, anointed by the Spirit, and offered His own blood as the final and sufficient sacrifice for our sins.

John’s point here is that God has borne witness to His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Spirit of truth bore witness to Jesus at His baptism, when He identified with sinners, although He Himself did not need to be cleansed. He testified of Jesus throughout His earthly ministry, through His miracles, His teaching, and His obedient life. He bore witness to Jesus as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, initially through John the Baptist’s witness (John 1:29), but supremely at the cross. He confirmed that witness through the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead (Rom. 1:4). The Spirit bore further witness when, in fulfillment of Jesus’ promise, He descended on the church at the Day of Pentecost. He further affirmed the witness to Jesus through the miracles that the apostles performed. We have that witness in the New Testament.

Thus John’s point is that God’s threefold witness to His Son—the Spirit, the water, and the blood—is trustworthy. In a court of law, truth is established when numerous witnesses say the

same thing and when those witnesses are shown to have credible character. John shows us that the three witnesses all agree, and they are not just the testimony of men, but of God Himself.

Thus John argues (5:9), "If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son." Every day we trust the testimony of fallen men, who are fallible at best. We could not deposit money in a bank, ride in a car, buy food at the grocery store, take an aspirin for a headache, or do any of the many things we do in our daily lives if we did not trust the witness of men. John is saying, "If you trust in men every day, can't you trust what God has testified concerning His Son?"

If you're not familiar with God's testimony, you can read it in the New Testament. Be careful, though, to read it prayerfully and with a submissive, searching heart, asking God to open your eyes to His truth. If you come at it as a proud skeptic, demanding proof, you will come away empty, because God is not in the business of giving proof to proud sinners. If you come at it with preconceived notions of what the Savior should be like, you are likely to miss Him, because He is not a Jesus who fits your every desire and whim. You can't make up a Jesus of your own liking. You must accept God's testimony to the Jesus of the Bible.

The Jews of Jesus' day, including the disciples, couldn't conceive of a Messiah who would suffer and die, even though Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22, along with the entire Old Testament sacrificial system, clearly predicted such. The risen Lord Jesus pointed out to the men on the Emmaus Road (Luke 24:25-26), "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" Luke adds (24:27), "Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures." The Scriptures give us God's clear testimony of His Son.

What should we do with this testimony? Clearly, we must receive it or believe it personally. If we do not believe it, as John shows (5:10), we make God a liar. If we do receive it, we have a sure foundation for our faith:

2. Believing God's witness to His Son gives us a sure foundation for our faith (5:10-13).

John outlines three benefits of believing God's testimony to His Son and one danger of disbelieving that testimony.

- A. Believing God's testimony gives us an inner witness, whereas disbelieving His testimony calls God a liar (5:10).

If we believe in Jesus as the Son of God, we have the testimony in ourselves. John is referring to the inner witness of the Spirit to the truth regarding Jesus Christ. The external witness is the objective testimony of the New Testament, through the apostles, to the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. That is the primary foundation that shows that Christianity is not merely psychological. But, when you believe that testimony about Christ, as we saw in our last study, it is because God has changed your heart. You have become a new creature in Him. You were dead in your sins, but now you are alive to God in Christ. You were blind to the truth of God's Word, but now you see. You were a rebellious God-hater, but now you are an obedient God-lover. When you believe, you have this inner witness in yourself.

But the one who rejects God's testimony to His Son through unbelief makes God to be a liar, which is a serious matter! None of us likes to be called a liar, especially in the context of trying to help someone. If I offered a street person a check for \$100 and he grabbed me by the lapel and said, "Prove to me that this check is good," I'd have good reason to take my check back and leave him to his misery. If he ripped my check in two and threw it back at me, he would not experience the blessing I offered him.

If a critic angrily says, "Prove to me that Jesus is the Son of God and I'll believe," he is doing far worse than tearing up my check. He is calling the only true God a liar. He is trampling on the gift of God's Son, who would forgive all his sins if he would receive Him. God has given more than sufficient testimony to His Son. If you receive that external testimony, God will give you the additional inner testimony that He is true. If you reject His external testimony, you will also lack the internal witness.

- B. Believing God's witness to His Son gives us eternal life (5:11-12).

John sums up God's testimony (5:11-12): "And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life." These important verses emphasize several vital truths:

First, eternal life is *God's gift*, not something we gain through our good works or efforts. It does not require some special secret knowledge, as the heretics taught. Like any gift, you must know about it (in this case, God has testified about it) and you must receive it. If you have to earn it, it's not a gift.

Second, God's gift is *eternal life*. Nothing could be a greater gift! Because of our sins, we were spiritually dead, alienated from the life of God. God gives us as our *present possession*, not only unending life, but also His very life. He is the author of life. Jesus promised that if we believe in Him, we shall live even if we die, and that everyone who lives and believes in Him will never die (John 11:25-26). In other words, physical death will not rob us of this eternal life with God.

Third, *Jesus Christ is everything*. If you have Him, you have eternal life. If you don't have Him, you do not have the life. As someone has said, "Christianity *is* Christ!" All of God's promises are yes in Him (2 Cor. 1:20). All that God offers us, He offers in Jesus Christ. He is the only sure, solid foundation for your faith. The most important question in the world is the one Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15). Peter's answer, inspired by God, is the only correct one (Matt. 16:16), "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Do you believe this testimony that God has given about His Son? If so, you have eternal life. If not, you do not have the life and you will perish if you do not repent and believe!

- C. Believing God's witness to His Son gives a sure foundation so that we can know that we have eternal life (5:13).

"These things" refer to the entire letter. John has written this letter so that his little children will not be unsettled by the false teachers. If they believe in the name (= person) of the Son of God, then they may know that they have eternal life. John doesn't want us to *hope* so, but to *know* so. You can know because God's testi-

mony about His Son is trustworthy. Your faith must rest in Jesus Christ alone, not in anything or anyone else. If your faith is in Christ, then you have the inner witness of His Spirit, that you are a child of God. You have the evidence in your life that He has changed your heart. You now believe the truth about Jesus. You obey God's commandments. You love God and others.

John's gospel (John 20:31) was "written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." His first epistle was written so that you who already believe in the name of the Son of God would not be shaken by false teaching, but rather, "so that you may know that you have eternal life."

### Conclusion

If you don't know whether or not you have eternal life, nothing is more important than to make sure. Go back and read again God's testimony to His Son in the gospels. See the witness of the Spirit throughout the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. God's testimony to Jesus is the foundation of our faith. Christianity is not just a psychological experience. It rests on this solid witness.

But, then, you must believe God's testimony about His Son. If you're neutral or ambivalent about it, you are not believing it. Worse, you're calling God a liar. John Stott writes (p. 182), "Unbelief is not a misfortune to be pitied; it is a sin to be deplored. Its sinfulness lies in the fact that it contradicts the word of the one true God and thus attributes falsehood to Him." Repent of your unbelief, of the audacity of calling the God of truth a liar. Accept His testimony to His Son and receive as a gift the eternal life that only the living God can impart.

## Application Questions

1. Why must we emphasize God's objective witness to Christ and not just our subjective testimony of a changed life?
2. If the Christian faith rests on historic evidence, in what sense does it require faith? Is the evidence alone enough to produce faith? Why/why not?
3. How important is assurance of salvation? What are the practical ramifications? What should a person do who lacks it?
4. What implications does our text have for witnessing to lost people? What should we emphasize?

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