

**MIDDLE-HEAVEN AND THE MEANING OF “THE SPIRIT, THE
WATER, AND THE BLOOD”
HOW A BIBLICAL WRITER DISCOVERS DEEPER MEANING
FROM HIS OWN EARLIER NARRATIVE**

1 John 5:6-8

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The text of 1 John 5:6-8 is a *crux interpretatum*. Throughout the history of Christian interpretation this passage has challenged understanding. It is a text that has both historical import and doctrinal significance for the church then and now.

My reason for approaching this passage again is that it may provide a special opportunity to demonstrate how the same author, having once narrated events accompanying the death of Christ later discovers and records by the Spirit a deeper meaning of which he was not at first aware. In this procedure he parallels what many authors of the New Testament do when they discover a deeper meaning in the Old Testament of which the Old Testament author was unaware. By the Holy Spirit, John discovers a deeper meaning beyond what he originally intended in his own earlier writing, the Gospel.¹ The new level of meaning arose because of the new opposition that had arisen to his teaching in the Gospel of John.

My procedure is to review the interpretations suggested for resolving the meaning of 1 John 5:6-8. I then apply a paradigm of hermeneutics that I've used elsewhere to help point to a solution.

The Setting of the Text

In order to aid in resolving the problems of interpretation it is important to note the context of these verses and the theme of the Epistle as a whole. While tracing the flow of thought is quite difficult I identify the theme of 1 John as: Fellowship with God necessitates obedience to the truth and love for one another in Christ. I believe this central theme is expressed most pointedly in the macrostructure of the book, 3:23.² There the two central concerns of the writer, truth and love, are brought together in one verse: “And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment.”

My understanding of the last major section falls into the following subpoints:³

A. The object of faith is Jesus Christ (5:6-12).

1. His coming was accompanied by water and blood (6a-b).
2. His coming is witnessed (6c-12).
 - a. The Spirit who is the truth witnesses (6c).

¹ I assume throughout that the author is the one traditionally identified as the Apostle John. I also assume that the author of this Epistle is the same as the author of the Gospel of John. See the major commentaries and other sources on the question of authorship.

² Robert E. Longacre, “Towards an Exegesis of 1 John Based on the Discourse Analysis of the Greek Text,” *Linguistics and New Testament Interpretation*, ed. David Alan Black (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 271-286, also identifies this as the central text.

³ I trace the presentation as follows:

Preface: The incarnation makes fellowship with God possible (1:1-4).

Body: Fellowship with God is based in truth and love (1:5-5:17).

I. The apostolic message declares the meaning/the partners of fellowship (1:5-2:2).

II. Genuine fellowship can be achieved (2:3-27).

III. Fellowship demands certain requirements (2:28-4:6).

IV. The essential place of love for the experience of fellowship with God is expanded (4:7-5:5).

V. The essential place of faith for the experience of fellowship is expanded (5:6-17).

Conclusion: Three final affirmations of certain knowledge summarize the essence of fellowship for believers (5:18-21).

b. The Spirit, the water, and the blood form one, ongoing witness (7-8).

c. God the Father bears witness (9).

(1) People receive the witness of human beings (9a).

(2) God's witness is greater than a human witness (9b).

d. The believer has the witness within (10-12).

In the passage at hand John introduces his topic of faith (v. 5), then the nature of the witness (vv. 6-9), then the results of the witness (vv. 8-12).⁴ Verse 5 is a swing verse, leading from thoughts before to thoughts that come after it. Hence some put verse 5 in the section before, others put it in the following section. Believing that "Jesus is the Son of God" could well be understood as an inclusion tying the whole passage together (5:5-12).

The Greek text of this portion is as follows.

⁶ Ou-to,j evstin o` evlqw.n diV u[datoj kai. ai[matoj(Vlh sou/j Cristo,j(ouv k evn tw/| u[dati mo,non avllV evn tw/| u[dati kai. evn tw/| ai[mat\ kai. to. pneu/ma, evstin to. marturou/n(o[ti to. pneu/ma, evstin h` avlh,qeiaÅ 7 o[ti trei/j eivsin oi` marturou/ntej(

⁸ to. pneu/ma kai. to. u[dwr kai. to. ai-ma(kai. oi` trei/j eivj to. e[n eivsinÅ

The Problems of Interpreting 1 John 5:6-8

Textual Variants

⁴ Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John, Word Biblical Commentary*, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco: Word Books, 1984), 274.

There are several textual variants in these verses.⁵ None of these variants seems to affect the interpretation of the text.

There are several major interpretive problems belonging to these verses.

(1) The meaning of the words, ο` evlqw.n diV u[datoj kai. ai[matoj(V\hsou/j Cristo,j;

(2) The repetition and addition of articles in evn tw/| u[dati mo,non avlIV evn tw/| u[dati kai. evn tw/| ai[mati;

(3) The change of the preposition from dia to en (used thrice);

(4) The emphasis made on the assertion that Christ came evn tw/| ai[mati;

(5) The meaning of the words, to. pneu/ma, evstin to. marturou/n;

(6) The meaning of the phrases, to. pneu/ma kai. to. u[dwr kai. to. ai-ma(kai. oi` trei/j eivj to. e[n eivsin.

Several of these problems of interpretation will be treated together, and several influence the resolution of others. In addition, the meaning of John 19:34, with its reference to the “blood and water” that flowed from Jesus’ side, influences this discussion.

A. The Meaning of “Water and Blood”

First, there is the problem of understanding what John means when he writes:

“This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ.” This problem is directly tied to the second: Why is there repetition of the first clause with an emphasis on

⁵ In verse 6, the words kai pneumatoj are found in several manuscripts, either to replace both kai aimatoj and aimati, or to be added to these words. At the end of verse 6, the words, to pneuma, are replaced by ο Cristoj, so that the sense becomes: “The Spirit is the one who testifies that Christ is the truth.” None of these variants has enough weight that textual critics are persuaded to include it in the text. An additional variant, the longest, which has gained much attention, is the so-called *Comma Johanneum* (“Johannine Comma”) inserted between verses 7 and 8. This concerns the three witnesses in heaven. Few

the “blood”? John indicates that the words, “came through water and blood,” refer to Jesus Christ. The words are an implicit reference to the title *ercomenoj* (as in Matt. 11:3; John 1:15, 27; 12:13; cf. Heb. 10:5 and Psalm 40:6-8; etc.), a messianic title used in Psalm 118:25-26 and elsewhere.

There are several major views on the meaning of the coming in “water and blood.” (1) Many take the words to refer to the two sacraments of baptism (water) and the eucharist (blood) (Ambrose, Augustine, Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Luther, Calvin, Cullmann). Thus *dia* means “with”: Christ came bringing the sacraments. Others (Tertullian) see this idea only in a secondary sense, and take actual water and blood as the primary sense. Still others (Westcott, Bonsirven) would confine the idea of the sacraments to the second mention of the terms later in the verse. They cite the change of prepositions as confirming this change, so that there is a continuation of Jesus’ coming under some new but analogous form. Others add that the Spirit, mentioned later in the same verse, constitutes a third sacrament. Brown, Smalley, and others cite several problems with this view.⁶ They add that it is “just possible” that a “secondary allusion to the sacraments is present” in this verse, if it is discovered in verse 8, but Smalley regards this as unlikely.⁷

give it a place in the text. C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1966), 128, accepts the addition of *pneumati* to 5:6a.

⁶ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 277. Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982), 575. They cite the following problems. (a) The aorist participle suggests that John’s concern is with Christ’s historical coming in history, not with his ongoing presence in the sacraments. (b) The use of “blood” as a synonym for the eucharist is “strange and without parallel.” The only other use of “blood” in the Epistle is 1:7, and there it cannot be referring to the eucharist. (c) There is no suggestion that the sacramental presence of Jesus in the experience of the believers was a problem for John’s readers. (d) The second clause that emphasizes that Christ came by blood seems to make little sense if it is meant to emphasize communion over baptism, since these two sacraments complement each other. (e) There is nothing in the context to suggest that *dia* has the accompanying circumstance idea of “bringing the sacraments.”

(2) Another view takes the words as a reference to the incarnation alone. The verb “come” is used by John for Christ’s entrance into the world (John 1:11; 5:43; 16:28). The verb “come” is used only twice with the preposition ἐν in the Epistle and both refer to Christ’s coming in the flesh. So John stresses that Christ’s coming was as an actual human being. The assumption is that John is combating a docetic view that denied that Jesus’ body was truly human since it was only composed of water. There are several faults with this view.⁸

(3) Others associate the words here with the “blood and water” of John 19:34-35 that flowed from Jesus’ side at the crucifixion. Both phrases are then linked to the following “testimony” (cf. John 19:35). This interpretation goes as far back as Augustine. Smalley argues against such a view.⁹

Yet Brown argues for this position—that only the death of Christ based in John 19:34 is in view.¹⁰ He notes that the only other place in John’s writings where the

⁷ Smalley, 277; Brown, 575. John Wilkinson, “The Incident of the Blood and Water in John 19:34,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28/2 (1975), 170-71, seems to allow a symbolic meaning for 1 John 5:6ff. but does not want that passage tied to John 19:34. In his view, the latter is clearly a reference to actual “blood and water,” even if Christians later found a symbolic meaning in it.

⁸ See Brown’s fuller comments, 576. He cites several faults: (a) It is not clear that John is combating docetism, particularly of the variety indicated. (b) In addition, John testifies to the fact that “blood and water” flowed from Jesus’ side at the crucifixion (John 19:34). Finally, the Spirit invoked by John in 5:6c is never associated by John with Jesus’ incarnation or coming into the world.

⁹ Smalley, 278. (a) John 19 is neither symbolic (the blood and water stand for the cleansing and life-giving work of Christ) nor sacramental (the death of Christ is associated with baptism and the eucharist). (b) The order of words here is “water and blood,” whereas it is “blood and water” in John 19. (c) Also the verbal idea is “he who came through” or “in” which seems difficult to match with the blood and water that “came out” (ἐξῆλθεν). (d) In John 19:35 the observer or bystander is the witness; here the witnessing is done by the “water and blood” and the Spirit. (e) The emphasis here on the “blood” does not have a similar emphasis in John 19.

¹⁰ Brown, 577-78. He appeals to the fact that the Gospel makes what Jesus is doing at his death the reason for his coming (18:37; yet I note that the verse actually says that Jesus came into the world in order to bear witness to the truth). “Blood” only occurs once in the Epistle and there (1:7) it refers to his death. Also John himself interprets the “rivers of living water” as referring to the Holy Spirit (7:38-39), so we should

elements of blood and water are joined is John 19:34 (although in reverse order). Brown concludes that it is only this view that puts emphasis on what John emphasized.

(4) The majority take the reference of the “water and blood” to be the terminal points of Jesus’ ministry, his baptism and death. This view was already current at the time of Tertullian (A.D. 200). At his baptism, Jesus “came” into his authority when the Father declared him to be the Son of God (Mark 1:11; John 1:34). He came into even greater authority by the “blood” of his cross, which John describes as his “glorification.”¹¹ By these words John is asserting that Jesus did not simply enter into the world but into his salvific mission.

While many take this view Smalley is not content to do so for the reason most take it—as opposing incipient Gnosticism.¹² Instead, Smalley follows Brown in arguing that the heresy involved viewing Jesus’ life as without salvific significance. John’s point in the Gospel is to show that Jesus, who is the Christ, is both divine and human, and his life ended in a saving, redeeming death.¹³

look for this meaning for the water coming out of Jesus’ side. Further, the only water that was salvific was the water at the cross, not the baptism. Also, John connects Jesus’ handing over the Spirit at his death with the “blood and water” (John 19:30, 34), and this explains the introduction of the Spirit in 5:6de. John changes the order of “blood and water” to “water and blood” to oppose those who emphasized that Jesus’ coming in water was sufficient salvifically. John emphasizes that only through his death did Jesus fully come as Savior of the world (1 John 4:14), as an atonement for the whole world (2:2).

¹¹ Smalley, 278.

¹² For example, I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 231-32. See also Stott, 178; and D. Edmund Hiebert, “An Expository Study of 1 John,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147:586 (Apr 90) 224-228. Many (such as Marshall) take this view because they believe that John emphasizes that Jesus came by “water and blood” in order to oppose Gnostic or incipient Gnostic teaching that Jesus only appeared to be a man who was born and who died (docetism), or that the heavenly Christ descended on Jesus at the baptism and left him before his death (Cerentianism). John’s point then is that Jesus was already the Christ on both occasions. Smalley’s difficulty (289) with this explanation is like Brown’s. It is doubtful that John’s words would have deflected a Cerentian view of the baptism, since the words, “came by water,” could be interpreted as meaning that Jesus was “adopted” as the Christ. Also it is unlikely that a Cerentian view of Christ would have developed in the Johannine community since the Gospel itself gives no support to it at all from the ministry as recorded therein. Hiebert suggests both forms.

(5) Another view takes the clause to refer to the incarnation of Christ alone. The water and blood refer to the physiological understanding of the times. An embryo was believed to be composed of menstrual blood and male seed (semen). John intends this reference because he wants to insist on the reality of Christ's body. Yet there is no proof that a heresy existed then that challenged the incarnation in this manner. It also leaves no meaning for the Holy Spirit later in the verse.

(6) Another view takes the "water and blood" to refer to the birth and death of Christ. The terms "water and spirit" in John 3:5 refer to physical and spiritual birth, not to spiritual birth which spirit and water mean together in light of appeals to Old Testament passages (Gen. 1:1-2; Ezek. 36:25-27; etc.).¹⁴ The physical and spiritual births of John 3:6 are meant to parallel or explicate 3:5, and parallel Nicodemus' reference to a mother's womb in verse 4. Thus it is best to see 1 John 5:6 as a reference to physical

¹³ Smalley, 279. Jesus then came by baptism, a symbol of cleansing, but his work was brought to triumph by his death, the means of achieving the cleansing. Indeed, Smalley argues that John refutes two heresies: the Greek view that Jesus was not fully man (hence the claim that Jesus was truly baptized and crucified); and the Jewish view that the Christ was not fully God (hence John uses the terms "Jesus Christ" to identify the one who experienced baptism and death). This interpretation of the clause parallels the Gospel, which begins with the baptism and ministry of Christ and ends with his death. Smalley argues that the objection that John lacks a birth narrative also to demonstrate his humanity is met by observing that John, like Mark, didn't need to include a birth narrative to make the point that Jesus was fully human as well as fully God.

However, Brown (577) counters that it is strange that John should represent Jesus' two comings (5:6bc) as a single one in 5:6a, as a single composite action. He cites attempts to meet this problem. Some suggest that the whole of 5:6abc is a reference to the baptism of Jesus, which was made effective at his death. Jesus refers to his death as a baptism (Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50), and the baptism in the Spirit occurred when Jesus was glorified in his death (John 7:39). This suggestion also counters the objection that John never records the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. Yet John also never uses the term "baptism" to refer to Jesus' death.

¹⁴ Ben Witherington, III, "The Waters of Birth: John 3.5 and 1 John 5.6-8," *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989) 155. He cites Old Testament texts (Pro. 5:15-18; Cant. 4:12-15) where water is used as a technical term or circumlocution for procreation, semen, amniotic fluid, or the process of birth itself (the breaking of the waters). He also cites the Mishnah; 4 Ezra 8.8; Mandaean literature; 3 Enoch 6.3; and Hippolytus as using water in a similar way. Witherington also shows that earlier literature from Old Babylonian, Elamite contracts, the Code of Hammurabi, Qumran, and the Hebrew verb itself (*HYL*) support the idea of "water" as a synonym for various facets of "procreation, child-bearing, and child birth" (156-58). He goes on to show that the verb *gennaw* can have the sense of being born, and the preposition *ek* may be "out of, from," or medium or agency ("by" or "through"). Dodd, also takes the reference to be the physical birth and death.

birth and death. The three witnesses then are the Spirit, the incarnation and the death. Jesus “in a special sense” comes to the believer “because of the objective fact of his Incarnation and his work on the cross, and the subjective application of the benefits of these two by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵ This is a viable interpretation.

(7) Another view takes the “water and blood” as meaning that Jesus came “baptizing by water,” that is, by the Holy Spirit, and “baptizing by blood,” that is, by cleansing by his blood (1:7). This view is based in the belief that John uses “mundane realities or events as a basis for developing narratives of extraordinary theological symbolism.”¹⁶ The water is symbolic (hence appositional) of the spirit and also appositional to the blood. John asserts that Jesus came not “with (baptismal) water only” but “with (baptismal) water and with blood (with which he cleanses from sin).”¹⁷

Many of the preceding views have some degree of merit, especially those that link the passage in 1 John to the Gospel, and to the symbolism found there. The idea of a secondary level of meaning is acknowledged, to some degree, by almost everyone.

B. The Significance of the Prepositions and Articles

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁶ Martinus C. De Boer, “Jesus the Baptizer: 1 John 5:5-8 and the Gospel of John,” *JBL* 107/1 (1988) 99. In 19:34 John identifies the blood as cleansing water (13:5, 10), in 1 John 5:6 he identifies the water as Jesus’ cleansing blood (104). De Boer asserts that 5:6 does not assert that something is done to Jesus but rather done by him. As John the Baptist baptized with water, Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit. The secessionists of 1 John thought that to be baptized by water (that is, to be cleansed by the Spirit) was sufficient. In this light they made the claims of sinlessness that John addresses in chapter one. But John argues that they needed also to be baptized by Jesus’ blood (that is, to be cleansed by the blood, as 1:7 affirms, also in the present tense). The baptismal water symbolizes the spirit, but it also symbolizes Jesus’ blood, which is the actual agent of cleansing. In 1 John 5:6-8 the three witnesses converge into the last one, which is the blood (105). De Boer notes that the narratives of John take on “massive symbolic overtones” (104; n. 59).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

The next major problem concerns the prepositions involved and the use or non-use of the article. The *diā* could have either an ablatival-genitival of means sense (unlikely), or the sense of manner (“through” or “by”), or a genitival spatial sense (an attendant circumstance: “with”). The resultant meaning is that Christ came either “by” water and blood, or that he came “through” or “in” or “with” water and blood. In the first part of verse 6 the one preposition (*diā*) controls the two nouns (“water” and “blood”), joining them, without a repetition of the preposition and without any articles involved. Hence the translation is either “Christ who came by water and blood”; or, “Christ who came through (in, with) water and blood.”¹⁸

In the next part of the verse there are three changes: the preposition *en* is used instead of *diā*; the preposition occurs three times, before each noun, rather than the single occurrence of *diā* in 6a; and each noun has the article, whereas it is lacking in 6a. The three uses of *en* occur along with three uses of the article in the dative-locative-instrumental form. The *en* could have the force of an instrumental dative of means (unlikely) or manner (“by” or “in”) or circumstance (“because of” or “with” water and blood) or a locative dative (“in, in the sphere of” water and blood). The effect of the use of the articles is to make each of the nouns distinct or definite (with “blood” used twice); or, the articles are anaphoric, to recall the same two nouns used in the first clause. The repetition of the preposition *en* with each of the nouns tends to stress each of them--the “water” and the “blood” as separate entities, and the repetition of “blood” stresses its importance over “water.” Hence the resultant translations are: “not by (or, in; or, because of; or, with) the water only but also by (or, in; or, because of; or, with) the water and by (or, in; or, because of; or, with) the blood.”

¹⁸ Marshall, 232.

What is the significance of these changes? Some see a difference of meaning between *diā* and *en* (see Marshall's and Brown's evaluation). Most (Barth, Brown, Bruce, Bultmann, Denney, Dodd, Schnackenburg, Smalley, Weiss, etc.) see no significant difference. The prepositions represent a stylistic variation.¹⁹ In a similar way there is dispute over the addition of the three articles.²⁰

In the end, the details about the prepositions and the articles show that multiple translations are equally viable. In themselves they do not really contribute to settling the meaning of the text.

C. The Meaning of the Witness of the Spirit

The next major problem is the meaning of the words at the end of verse 6: "and the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth." The change at the beginning of the verse, from the aorist participle and the accompanying historical sense, to the present participle is stark. Several views are possible. (1) Some conclude that the

¹⁹ Smalley, 280. Smalley takes them both as manner, hence ". . . came in water and blood; not in water only but in water and in blood." Yet there seems to be no such use of *diā* with the genitive with this sense. C. Haas, *et al*, *A Translator's Handbook on the Letters of John* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1972), 118-19, takes the *diā* as local ("through water . . . blood"), but while it may be meaningful to say that Christ "went through water" (of baptism) it is strange to say that Christ "went through blood." He also suggests attendant circumstance and a secondary meaning: Jesus comes "with" the water and the blood. Brown (574) takes the *diā* as "by" and the *en* as "in." As Brown points out, the idea that there is a meaningless variation of preposition is of little help since the meaning of *diā* is obscure. Perhaps it is best to take *diā* and *en* as "in" or "by."

The threefold repetition of the preposition suggests that the nouns are being treated as separate entities, compared to their being joined in verse 6a. Yet this is uncertain, Brown (574) observes. The author may be stressing the importance of Christ's coming in blood rather than the separateness of the blood in the phrase "in water and in blood." Brown is influenced in his view, no doubt, by the fact that he wants to link the "water" and the "blood."

²⁰ Smalley, 280, believes that the addition may be deliberate. He agrees with Houlden that in the first clause "water and blood" were the general instruments of the humanity of Jesus, but in the second clause the articles make these the "specific instances of these elements": "the" water of baptism and "the" blood of the cross. Brown (574) is uncertain and cites Haas (119) as saying that the articles are anaphoric—to show that the "water" and "blood" refer back to 6a.

Interestingly, at this point Smalley (280) seems to contradict himself. Earlier he took the prepositions as indicating manner, now he states that the force is instrumental. The latter suggests the translation, "by means of" rather than "in" or "by."

“one who testifies” is action going on at the time of John’s writing many years after the event of the crucifixion. The idea is that the Spirit bears a witness of truth (cf. 4:2) since he is the truth. The anointing, probably the Holy Spirit, is true (2:20, 27). It is by the Spirit that we know that we abide in God and that he abides in us (3:23; 4:2).

(2) Smalley believes that the present witness of the Spirit is to the reality of Jesus as one with God and one with man. The witness is corporate “by means of preaching, inspired prophecy and the sacraments” and individual, in the hearts of believers.²¹ The “spiritual criteria for validating christological truth are both objective and subjective, outward and inward.”²² Smalley suggests that the witness of the Spirit is not only present, but past as well. He testified to Jesus’ ministry, at the baptism, and even inspired the prophets who spoke of the coming of Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 1:10-12; 2 Pet. 1:20-21; cf. John 5:39).²³

(3) Brown cites other minor views: the Spirit testifies through the apostles; or in or through the Gospel of John; or in the heart of the Christian. Yet the verse connects the Spirit’s testifying with Jesus’ coming by/in water and blood. (4) Brown suggests that John is arguing that the Spirit gave testimony through the Beloved Disciple to the correct meaning of the blood and water flowing from Jesus’ side because the Spirit had been

²¹ Smalley, 280.

²² Ibid. Smalley cites Dodd (129), Schnackenburg 259-60), Stott (180), Bultmann (80), and Maurice 274-76) as in agreement. Dodd (129) writes that the meaning is not so much the interior witness of the Holy Spirit but the “outward expression of that inner witness in the corporate life of the Church, and particularly in inspired or prophetic utterance (itself dependent on the ‘interior witness’) by which the Church proclaimed and confirmed the truth of the Gospel.”

²³ Ibid. Similarly, Marshall (234) suggests that the Spirit testifies to our inward hearts or through the preaching of the Word, or the way the Spirit works through the church (through preaching and sacraments); or convinces the believer in his heart of the truth of the gospel; or that the Spirit witnessed to Jesus by inspiring Old Testament prophets who prophesied of Christ (235).

given to that Disciple before Jesus died.²⁴ The flow of blood portrayed Jesus as a sacrificial victim, and the flow of water symbolized his gift of the Spirit to believers. The present tense indicates that the Spirit's witness is not just past; it continues in the "testimony of the 'we' of the Johannine School (1 John 1:2) who join themselves to and prolong the testimony of the Beloved Disciple."²⁵

The resolution of the meaning of the "witness" of the Spirit is included under the discussion of the last problem. The last clause of verse 6 is introduced by *oti*. The causal idea may imply that the Spirit gives his testimony because he is either fitted or constrained to do so. It seems best, as Westcott and Smalley agree, to take it as including both ideas since in the divine, "nature and office coincide."²⁶

D. The Meaning of "There Are Three That Witness: the Spirit and the Water and the Blood"

The last major problem arises in verses 7-8. John says: "For there are three who bear witness, the Spirit, the water, and the blood, and these three are at one." The Spirit is regarded as personal and this leads to the personification of the water and blood.²⁷ The present participle ("those who bear witness") reinforces the personal character: they go

²⁴ Brown, 579. The Spirit becomes a reality for others (John 7:39) only through the sacrificial death of Jesus, and "the Spirit himself testified to that by enabling the Beloved Disciple to penetrate the meaning of the death" (580). Brown takes the author of the Epistle to be one of the Johannine school, different from the author of the Gospel. Yet the question of authorship does not affect the solutions to the problems discussed.

²⁵ Ibid, 580. Brown points out that the closest passage to "The Spirit is the one who testifies, for the Spirit is the truth" is the description of the Apostle in 21:24: "This is the disciple who testifies . . . and we know that his testimony is true."

²⁶ Smalley, 280. Westcott, 184.

²⁷ Smalley, 281.

on witnessing. The fact that the witness is united argues for an exclusive view of the work of Christ.²⁸

The views of interpreting these words are several. (1) While the grammar suggests that all three are equal in their witness, some find that the Spirit witnesses through the water and blood, or vice-versa. However, the shift of function and relationship from verse 6 to verses 7-8 suggests a move from the historical ministry of Jesus to a more symbolic thrust. Various symbolic ideas have been proposed. (2) The oldest, recorded interpretation comes from Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 200) that the Spirit is life, the water is regeneration, and blood is knowledge. (3) The Spirit, the water, and the blood refer to three classes of witness to Christ: the Christian prophet, John the Baptist, and the writer of 1 John himself. This is a weak view, as even its spokesman, Bengel, admits.²⁹ (4) Some see the trinity here: God is the Spirit, Christ is the blood, and the Spirit is the water. Various texts support this (John 4:24; 7:38-39; 19:34), and this idea probably led to the *Johannine Comma* about the three witnesses in heaven. Yet this view is unlikely. (5) Some take the words as a reference to the believers' sanctification, new life, and inspiration. (6) The three are the "mysteries" of baptism (John 3:5-8), the eucharist (John 6:54-56, 63), and the reception of the Spirit (John 20:22-23; 1 John 2:20).³⁰ Yet, as Smalley points out, this view inverts John's order and the first two mysteries are not associated with witness. (7) Some take the words to refer to Christ's power to vivify, cleanse, and atone. (8) Some see this as a reference to an early

²⁸ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, rep. 1981), 120, comments that the witness of the three stands or falls together. One cannot claim to accept the witness of the Spirit if one rejects the witness of the water and the blood.

²⁹ Smalley (281) cites Bengel (*Gnomon* 5, 144-46).

pattern of Christian initiation preserved in the Syriac church in which anointing (with oil), baptism, and the Lord's Supper were administered in this order.³¹ Although there is evidence that the Spirit was received before baptism, there is no evidence in the New Testament that anointing was administered before baptism.³²

(9) A more popular solution to this problem is to take the words as a reference to the two sacraments of baptism and the eucharist. Those who see the sacraments in 5:6ab would see them here as well. These give an ongoing witness to the truth of the incarnation and the redemptive death of Christ, "confirming the prophetic word inspired by the Spirit."³³

³⁰ Ibid. Smalley cites Windisch, 133.

³¹ Ibid. Smalley cites Manson (*JTS* 48 [1947] 25-33) and Nauck (*Tradition*, 147-82) as propounding this view. See Marshall's evaluation (239, n. 29). A prebaptismal anointing (2:20, 27) with oil would symbolize the gift of the Spirit, the third sacrament. Appeal is made to Acts 10:44-48, where the Spirit is given before baptism (yet in 2:28; 8:15-16 the opposite order occurs), and to *Testament of Levi* 8:4-5.

³² Ibid. Smalley cites Schnackenburg, 263, as explaining and critiquing this view. Brown (584) cites two difficulties. (a) There is no "positive proof" for a sacrament of the Spirit in the Johannine Community. (b) The author doesn't use the term *chrisma* here. The same problem exists for the view that 5:7-8 refers to the Spirit and two sacraments.

³³ Ibid., 282. Westcott; Law, *Tests*, 121; Dodd, 130-31; Bultmann, 80-81; Houlden, 128-30; and Haas, 120, support this view. Yet this is only one part of Dodd's interpretation. Brown (583) and Smalley (282) cite several objections to this view. Brown points out that the main problem is how the Spirit fits into this view. Preiss makes the Spirit the interior witness to correspond to the exterior witness of the two sacraments. Dodd refers the Spirit to the living voice of prophecy and the other two refer to the two evangelical sacraments. Schnackenburg makes the Spirit the principle of life from which the two sacraments receive the supernatural power. The *Apostolic Constitutions* makes the Spirit given at baptism to be the Paraclete who proclaims Christ.

Smalley's objections are several. (a) He asserts that nothing in the text indicates that the words "water and blood" in verse 8 have a different meaning than the words in verse 6ab (yet Brown would say that the new verbs and new tenses allow a new meaning). (b) "A sacramental exegesis of 'water and blood' means that 'Spirit' cannot really be understood in a similar way." (c) To use "blood" to stand for the eucharist is without parallel. Attempts to link it with the idea of "flesh" as a reference to the eucharist in John 6:53-56 are not convincing. The passage need not be interpreted in exclusively sacramental terms, and "blood" is consistently mentioned with "flesh." (d) "Christian baptism as such can scarcely point to the reality of Christ's baptism." Smalley cites Marshall, 238, here.

(10) An alternative to the sacramental view is to accept that the primary reference of verses 6 and 8 is to the historical events (baptism and death) surrounding the ministry of Jesus, but to find also a secondary allusion to baptism and communion. This is the view of Stott, Brooke, Ross, Bruce, and others.

(11) Many (Smalley, Marshall, Bruce, etc.) view that the meaning in both passages (vv. 6 and 7-8) is the same and is “essentially historical.”³⁴ John exhorts the readers to keep faith in the revelation of God centered on the historical coming of Christ at his baptism and death. The Holy Spirit provides the witness to Christ, beginning at his baptism (John 1:32), and was given to the disciples after Jesus was glorified on the cross (John 19:30; cf. 7:38-39) when he empowered them (John 20:22; cf. 15:26-27). Past events continue to bear witness, just as the Old Testament can still bear witness to Jesus.³⁵ The Spirit is cited as the first that witnesses because his witness is fundamental.³⁶

(12) Brown takes verses 7-8 as he does verse 6. The water, the blood, and the Spirit are witnesses to the salvific death of Christ, to the blood and water that came from Jesus’ side. The Spirit is identified in 19:30 as yielded up. There is no reference to the baptism. The three who continue to witness in 1 John may be the three sacraments or the ongoing power of Jesus to vivify, cleanse, and atone. Brown seems to allow for different levels of meaning.

³⁴ Smalley, 282. Note the qualifications inherent in his words. Dodd (130-31) easily equates verse 6 with verses 7-8 because he adds the variant, “and spirit,” to verse 6.

³⁵ Marshall, 237-38. Yet John says that the Spirit witnesses, not the word or event.

³⁶ Smalley, 282. So also Marshall (238-39) takes verse 8 to mean the same as verse 6. Yet he believes it is possible that baptism and the eucharist symbolize Jesus’ baptism and death, although he rejects this for verse 6 (234).

The preceding shows that there are multiple ways for understanding 1 John 5:7-8. Many of these are linked to 5:6, and the same possibility of secondary meanings as there.

A New Proposal: Interpreting According to a Biblical View of Reality

Elsewhere, I've written that our approach to hermeneutics should begin with worldview, specifically a biblical worldview of what constitutes reality. Biblical reality affirms that which is both essential (earthly, temporal, and primarily physical and visible), and also that which is existential (heavenly, eternal, and unseen). Finally, these realities are not stagnant. There is a process under way by which essential reality is being actualized more and more in existential reality. The kingdom is not just "here, but not yet," but being actualized more and more.

Applying this worldview or paradigm of reality to hermeneutics means that there is a surface or historical meaning (pertaining to existential reality), and a deeper or spiritual meaning (corresponding to essential reality). Actualization is the unfolding of the essential meaning for each generation as the Spirit speaks anew the word for his people. Symbolism points to, and is part of, the essential meaning.

The paradigm (i.e., biblical reality) leads us to expect that there is another level of meaning to much of Scripture. It is that meaning that often transcends the human authors' understanding, and what they intend. It is that meaning planted there by the Holy Spirit as he inspired people to write. The paradigm is especially helpful to discover how the New Testament authors often find a Christological meaning that seems not to have been within the scope of the intention of the human authors of the Old Testament. This seems to agree with what 1 Peter 1:10-12 says.

This paradigm does not provide specific methodological steps for getting meaning. Rather it sets forth a mindset or framework of thinking which agrees with the thinking of the authors of Scripture. It is a different, holistic approach.

A major obstacle to the interpretation of this passage is that we are not sufficiently informed by the Epistle.³⁷ The Gospel account (19:34) is about one thing, it seems, and the Epistle about something else (suggested by the idea of “came” and the three witnesses). Applying the paradigm suggests that the meaning of “the water and the blood” and the “blood and water” is neither totally historical nor totally symbolic (i.e., sacramental). Both the immediate and broader texts give certain parameters for our interpretation: blood is associated with death, cleansing, and atonement; and water is associated with the Spirit, cleansing, renewal, new birth, and baptism. We also know that there were heretical tendencies that denied the reality of deity in a fully human form.

Support for Applying the Paradigm to 1 John 5:6-8

There are reasons for finding an historical and an essential meaning here. First, almost every commentator on the Johannine Epistles finds or allows for a secondary and/or symbolic meaning. Some take “water and blood” as literal and historical (a reference to what came from Jesus’ side, as Brown), and then find a secondary symbolic meaning (they stand for the death of Christ; and/or they signify the sacraments, or something else). Others take the terms directly as symbolic, to stand for the baptism and death of Christ. Others take this symbolic meaning and add that there is a secondary symbolic meaning pointing to the sacraments or something else. Others make them refer directly to the two sacraments, or three.

³⁷ As Dodd, 130, wisely points out.

Second, there is evidence for a secondary level of meaning from the original source text John is alluding to—the Gospel of John. The key to finding additional levels of meaning in the Old Testament, and cited in the New, is found in the context of the Old Testament. In a corresponding manner the key to the deeper level of meaning in 1 John is found in the text of the Gospel of John. When commentators discuss John 19:34 many are not content to take the “blood and water” as simply historical with no secondary meaning.

For example, Carson comments that the blood and water (John 19:34) are meant to emphasize Jesus’ death, his death as a human being. He then asks if John “intends some further symbolism.”³⁸ He rejects a second or even third level that would point to the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist (even if linkage is made with 6:55: eating Jesus’ flesh, the true food; drinking Jesus’ blood, the true drink).³⁹ Yet he suggests that if there is a “secondary level of symbolism,” then the ideas of Dodd and Schnackenburg are most helpful. The blood and water from Jesus’ side may be “a ‘sign’ of the life and cleansing that flow from Jesus’ death.” The blood points to the redemptive death of Christ which is the basis of the believer’s eternal life (6:53-54) and purifies from sin (1 John 1:7). The water symbolizes cleansing (John 3:5), life (4:14), and the Spirit (7:38-39)—again based in the death of Christ. He also suggests, because John uses water to refer to the Holy Spirit (7:38-39), that John here alludes to the two “water-from-the-rock

³⁸ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 624. See also 623-24, 297-98, 321-329.

³⁹ Interestingly, when discussing 6:55, Carson rejects the idea that eating Christ’s flesh and drinking his blood is to be interpreted of the eucharist. For the uninstructed the meaning is simply a metaphor for believing in Christ. Yet Carson goes on to say that for the thoughtful Christian reader there is the prompting to look behind the eucharist to find that it is a parable for receiving Christ by faith. Carson quotes Cranmer as saying that the passage speaks figuratively, that Christ is in the bread and wine, and

episodes” of Exodus 17 and Numbers 20 as mediated through Nehemiah 9. God as the Rock of his people (Ps. 18:31, 46; 95:1) reveals himself in his Word, who is smitten for his people so that they might receive the promised Spirit.⁴⁰ There is a whole “matrix of thought” that derives from several passages.⁴¹ There is even more that Carson cites.

Third, John’s use of the present tense, that there are “three who witness,” signals that there is another meaning beyond the historical (19:35; cf. “the one who came,” 1 John 5:6) which is ongoing. This meaning is actualized by the Spirit as he continues to teach the corporate body (1 John 2:27: note the present “teaches”). The significance of the present tense is reinforced by the perfect in verse 9: “God has witnessed concerning his Son” (the effect of the witness extends into the present).⁴²

spiritually is in them that partake in the Lord’s Supper. The thoughtful would think of the eucharist, but John does not speak directly of this (299-300). So again Carson seems to allow for a secondary meaning.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 625.

⁴¹ Clearly, Carson allows for a secondary, symbolic meaning. His discussion of 7:38-39 argues persuasively that in light of the setting of the Feast of Tabernacles (7:2) the reference to the Scripture (“as the Scripture said, rivers of living water will flow from his belly”) points to a “matrix of thought” that derives from several passages (321-329). The metaphor of water is used to speak of spiritual blessing for believers, including the promise of the Spirit related to the Davidic monarch and the new covenant (Isa. 12:3; 44:3; 49:10; 58:11; Ezek. 36:25-27; 47:1; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:11-15; Zech. 13:1). Yet Nehemiah 8:5-18 is more directly in view. There the returning exiles celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. They recount in prayer (Neh. 9:15, 19-20) the events of the Exodus including the supply of the Spirit, the manna, and water from the rock on two occasions (as recorded in Exod. 17 and Num. 20). There are many other passages that link water from the rock and the Spirit (Isa. 44:3; Ezek. 47:1-12; Num. 24:6-9), and secondary passages simply linking water and the Spirit (Pro. 4:23; 5:15; Isa. 12:3; 49:10; Ezek. 36:25-27; 47:1ff.; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:11-15; Zech. 13:1; 14:8). Thus Jesus draws on Nehemiah 9, where connection is made of the water, manna, and Spirit (v. 20). But Jesus goes further and makes himself the only satisfying source of real drink, the Holy Spirit. In 7:39 John makes explicit that Jesus has the Holy Spirit in mind when he speaks of living water.

⁴² Dodd, 130-31, writes along similar lines. He notes that the Spirit is “both a factor in the historical life of Jesus, and a continuing factor in the experience of the Church” (130). The baptism and the crucifixion are historical witnesses to the incarnate Son of God. But further, the sacrament of baptism is the “counterpart” to the baptism of Christ, and the eucharist is the “counterpart” to his sacrificial death (131). The author thinks of these sacraments as attesting to believers the abiding effects of the life and death of Christ, of his incarnation and redemptive death. Their value as evidence lies in their being concrete and objective actions, “recalling (or re-presenting)” the historical facts of the Gospel, while also being the “vehicles of a supra-historical life in the Church” (131). They “confirm the prophetic word inspired by the Spirit”—the living voice of prophecy. Similarly, Westcott (200) acknowledges that many facts of the gospel are rare.

The paradigm lends clarity to the texts at hand. If we begin the interpretation of 1 John 5:6-8 with John 19:34, which everyone should do, then the paradigm calls for two levels of meaning. The surface (historical, existential) meaning is that Jesus was an actual human being having human blood and water, who was born as a human being and who actually died as a human being. This is John's obvious point, but probably not his primary or more significant point. Yet this meaning for the wounding will allow him later to use the wound in the side to prove that the resurrected one is the same Jesus who died, as 20:25-27 shows.

The paradigm also affirms an essential (spiritual, heavenly, eternal) meaning. The "blood and water" stand for redemption and cleansing, or even the two sacraments. Perhaps all these meanings are involved, whether or not John intends them all here. In the context of 19:36-37 John cites two or more Old Testament passages as "fulfilled"—one emphasizing historical reality, the other spiritual reality. The Old Testament texts pointing to historical reality are first. The words, "None of his bones will be broken," fulfills three passages. Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12 concern instructions for the Passover lamb. Psalm 34:20 concerns the fact that God cares for the righteous person as a Passover lamb: "He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken." While these three texts generally suggest an historical or physical meaning, the last one is more essential since it deals with a righteous person. Hence David saw a deeper meaning to the

Instead, John implies and interprets them (birth, baptism, passion, resurrection, ascension, session, coming judgment). John also assumes a knowledge of the life and teaching of Christ (2:6, 25; 3:1, 23; 1:1).

regulation about the Passover lamb.⁴³ In the New Testament Jesus is called the “Passover” (1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:19). Thus even in these existential, historical passages the essential is also present.

The second quote cited by John (19:37) emphasizes the spiritual, essential meaning of Jesus’ death. Zechariah 12:10 states: “They will look on *me* whom they have pierced.” This passage points to the cleansing of Israel in a future day (13:1: “In that day a fountain will be opened for the House of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for impurity”). In addition, the first part of 12:10 says: “And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and of supplications, so that they will look on me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for him” In his quotation John changes the “me” in Zechariah to “him” to identify Yahweh with Christ. Thereby he actualizes the essential meaning.

Even the resurrected body of Jesus symbolizes this twofold level of meaning—the physical and the spiritual. For Jesus’ resurrected body had physical elements to it (all the wounds were still visible) and spiritual elements (the body was transformed along extra-earthly lines: the wounds had not “healed” or closed; and his body could apparently pass through walls). Jesus’ resurrected body (and the believers’; cf. 1 Cor. 15; 2 Cor. 5) represents a biblical worldview of reality with its two levels: the earthly and the heavenly.

Applying the Paradigm to 1 John 5:6-8

Since elsewhere the kingdom paradigm points to a surface meaning and a deeper meaning, we should expect more than one level of meaning in the present texts. The

⁴³ In the contexts the reference to God’s angel as being with Israel (Exod. 23:20ff.; Num. 9:14ff.) and the righteous person (Ps. 34:7) ties the passages together, and with Neh. 9:19.

existential meaning is basic to and controlling of the other level, the spiritual meaning. The paradigm allows several spiritual meanings as the interpreter, in agreement with the community of faith, and led by the Spirit, discovers them. Who can deny to John himself the option of suggesting one spiritual meaning in John 19, and another in 1 John 5? Or multiple ones in both texts? There are spiritual meanings that John suggests, and additional spiritual meanings that the church may later discover, which contextualize the text for its benefit. Out of its new reading of the text new meaning is discovered to answer questions that John could not have ever anticipated. But God by his Spirit implanted those meanings foreknowing our later inquiry. Saints of old cannot be made perfect or complete without us, without our contribution to the living organism of the Christian community (Heb. 11:39-40). Likewise, the meaning of the text known to them does not exhaust the meanings available to us. And this is not new application of the text. This is part of an original breadth or depth of a complex of meaning that God the Spirit intended all along.⁴⁴

I suggest that in 19:34 John intends that the “blood and water” mean that Jesus was actually human and that he really died. But for the careful reader he also intends that his death has a deeper, symbolic meaning; it provides cleansing, that the Holy Spirit is available to accomplish this, and that redemption, atonement, and the forgiveness of sins are available through the blood of Christ. All three ideas (cleansing, the Holy Spirit, and atonement) are in the contexts of the quoted Psalm 34:20 and Zechariah 12:10 (and in many other passages having verbal links to John 6:29-69 and 7:38-39).

⁴⁴ See Vern Sheridan Poythress, “Divine Meaning of Scripture,” *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?* ed. G.K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 107-113.

In 1 John 5:6 John intends that the “water and blood” mean, as in the Gospel, that Jesus actually came as a human being and died. Yet his own reflection on the event of Christ’s death leads him to write further and intend another level of meaning. He now points explicitly to the Holy Spirit’s presence at that fateful hour as a witness to the events and to what they mean. What was secondary in the Gospel (particularly the implicit reference to the Spirit) becomes the surface meaning (he explicitly refers to the Spirit—that he was present then) in the Epistle. Then other secondary meanings, all part of the spiritual or essential meaning, arose.

What led to the new level of meaning? As new concerns had arisen between the event of the death of Christ and John’s writing the Gospel, so now new questions had arisen in John’s history since his penning the Gospel. Secessionists once among the believers distorted or denied the reality of God in the human body of Jesus (2:18-23; 4:1-6). The witness of the Holy Spirit, perhaps as “inspired” prophecy (cf. 1 Cor. 2:13; 14:1ff.), was the corrective to this deceit (2:20, 27). The Spirit taught a new secondary or deeper (essential) meaning in addition to that in the Gospel. This meaning is true because the Spirit who gives it is the truth (5:6).

The emphasis on Jesus’ having come by the “blood,” and its ongoing witness, is John’s contextualizing the events of John 19 for a later day when the heresy of incipient Gnosticism arose. He redacts his earlier account. He shapes the “quote” for a later time (reversing the order of “blood and water”), and shapes his expression of the heresy (1 John 2:18-29; 4:1-6) to match it to the quote by emphasizing the denial of the human nature of Christ.⁴⁵ His recording the events and concepts in the order he does is shaped

⁴⁵ Similarly, in his account in the Gospel John had included certain events to match prophecies of the Old Testament, then shaped what he quoted (changing “me” in Zech. 12:10 to “him whom” in 19:37) to agree

by his understanding of the essential reality and meaning standing behind the existential meaning.

By the Spirit we later discover and affirm other dimensions of the spiritual (essential) meaning: the three witnesses are three sacraments, or two sacraments; or, the words point to the baptism and death of Christ, or to his incarnation and death. All such meaning is consonant with John's words and is meaning that he would approve. It is there by virtue of the Spirit who continues to witness to the meaning of Christ's death. The meaning the church discovers derives from the Spirit of God, and it is true.

How do we discern false meaning? Among other things, the spiritual meaning cannot contradict John's surface meaning—that Jesus was truly God and truly man, and truly died. False meaning does not derive from the ongoing witness of the Spirit and is not true. The Spirit's new teaching must agree with the Spirit's former teaching (2:27; John 14:26).

Contributions of This Worldview Approach

What are the contributions that the hermeneutical application of the paradigm of reality to 1 John 5:6-8 offer? First, it encourages the interpreter to expect to find, in addition to the surface meaning, a bonus, secondary, or deeper meaning. Those readers who are more mature Christians and know the Old Testament more fully will discover this spiritual meaning.⁴⁶ While the surface meaning contributes to a certain level of

with the historical account. In addition, the quotation points to its larger context which informs the meaning of the events at the cross.

⁴⁶A.T. France, "The Formula-Quotations of Matthew 2 and the Problem of Communication," *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?* ed. G.K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 119-134, points out that Matthew writes on two levels: the surface meaning, which any reasonably intelligent reader might be expected to grasp, and a "bonus meaning" which the more sharp-eyed, or "better instructed in Old Testament Scripture, or who may have shared with the author certain traditions of interpretation which were not commonly followed" (123). He uses "bonus meaning" to distinguish deeper meaning from the

understanding, the deeper meaning leads the reader to greater understanding and maturity, especially how the entire canon contributes to greater understanding of this text. Second, the paradigm makes it clear that one doesn't have to choose between a surface meaning and a deeper meaning. Both have equal validity. Often what the human author did not intend as a meaning, the Spirit of God did. Third, from several possibilities this approach provides direction toward the choice of that spiritual meaning that points to eternal, heavenly ideas. The spiritual meaning most in agreement with heavenly things, particularly the manifestation of the kingdom and the King, has greater claim to legitimacy. Fourth, and most importantly, it empowers the believer to be involved in the meaning of the text. The essential reality is to be actualized by each Christian, by every generation. We are those who participate in baptism and communion as an ongoing affirmation of our faith, as a recognition that the Spirit is continuing to witness to us. We have the Spirit flowing within as living water. We are regenerated, cleansed by water and blood, and indwelt by the Spirit of God. Fifth, in this particular instance, we are encouraged to think that what was John's secondary level of meaning in the Gospel has become his first level of meaning in the Epistle. As Jesus died between heaven and earth, so the meaning of his death partakes of both realms.

Concluding Concerns

If this approach appears to be subjective, it is John who gives impetus to such subjectivity. He discovers secondary meanings. In addition, *every* interpretation is subjective. John identifies the Spirit, the source of interpretation, as one of the three

“surface meaning” (123). Note how Carson's words (cited above) assume a distinction between a casual and more mature, thoughtful reader.

witnesses, and virtually every interpreter says that the Spirit is the subjective one of the three. He corresponds to the more objective witnesses of the “water and blood.”

It should be added that the essential meaning we discover is authoritative, but the scope of its authority is limited—perhaps to an individual, a local church, or a national or international church. As with all interpretation that we discover, such does not rise to the level of the canon—as universally authoritative or normative.

Does the paradigm of reality affect the choice of variant readings? The paradigm encourages us to think a particular way as we approach the text, to look for secondary meaning beyond the obvious. While the ideas found in the additions of “the Spirit” to 5:6a, and the *Comma Johanneum* are helpful theologically, both of these readings make the secondary, implicit meaning explicit, and thus counter John’s style.⁴⁷

Does the paradigm explain the change of prepositions? While the change may be stylistic, it may signal John’s advance in argument or reality (and in meaning). He moves the meaning forward to another, secondary level.⁴⁸ The emphasis is put on the coming in/by blood because of the contextual challenge to the true humanity of the divine Christ. This suggests that the secondary meaning tied to the blood is more weighty than the secondary meaning tied to the water (in contrast to the Gospel). This may explain why

⁴⁷ The first addition makes clear the secondary meaning in John 19:34, and in 5:6b-d. Yet this is the primary reason why we should not adopt the reading in 5:6a, since the tendency of scribes is to clarify what is obscure. By taking the more obscure text as original, we allow John to refer first to John 19:34, and then to expand the meaning. The addition is not theologically aberrant; it is a matter of what John actually wrote. Textual criticism seeks only to secure the text, not to secure theology or understanding. The addition of the *Comma Johanneum* interrupts the theology of the author who is stressing the heavenly meaning of things on earth. The *Comma* makes explicit what John does not, and limits the potential secondary meanings.

⁴⁸ “Secondary” does not mean necessarily less important. The paradigm suggests that meaning is dynamic (because of the Spirit who is involved in the inscripturation and interpretive processes) and multifaceted. We may start with the primary and proceed to the secondary, yet the latter will lead us back to the primary. This circular play suggests that speaking of “primary” and “secondary” may not be the best terminology.

the Spirit, implicit in the Gospel, is made explicit in 1 John (since the blood is emphasized, not the water).