

## Stoeckhardt and the *Comma Johanneum*

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*Editor's Note: Reprinted from George Stoeckhardt. Lectures on the Three Letters of John. Translated by Hugo W. Degner. Aitkin, Minnesota: Hope Press, 1963, pp. 116–123. This section of Lectures on the Three Letters of John gives an excellent defense for including the Comma Johanneum in the sacred text.*

1 John 5:6: "This is He that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth." (KJV)

"This is He who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ; not with the water alone, but with the water and the blood; and it is the Spirit who bears witness that the Spirit is the truth." Jesus, the Son of God, had just been denoted as the object of faith. That faith which firmly believes that Jesus is the Son of God is the true faith and has a sure foundation.

Concerning this object of faith a further statement is made: "He has come through water and blood." What is the meaning of these two terms, "water and blood"?

Most of the older interpreters take "water" to refer to the Baptism which Jesus received, and "blood" to the blood which He shed on the cross for our redemption. They think John would here offer a retrospective glance on Christ's coming as our Redeemer. First He was baptized with water, and at the end of His mission He shed His blood on the cross.

But what should we then make of "through" or "by" water and blood? The aforementioned interpreters answered that through His Baptism and through His blood shed on the cross He gave evidence that He was the Redeemer. Yet it does not state that here, but merely that He has "come." Then, too, we must bear in mind, when the Scripture in other places speaks of Christ's work of redemption, it never mentions the Baptism of Jesus in this connection. And never is His Baptism placed parallel to His death. We certainly would not want to say that Christ redeemed us through His Baptism and through His death.

Above all it should be noted that "water" and "blood" here are referred to as bearing witness. For in the words immediately following it is said, "And it is the Spirit who bears witness." That implies that other witnesses must have been mentioned. And a little farther down it is asserted, "There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood." So there can be no question but that water and blood here come into consideration as such that bear witness, and not as the means of our redemption.

Christ has come through water and blood and so has borne witness of Himself. This water and this blood point to a particular manner of Christ's coming. It is not ordinary water that is meant here, but the water of Holy Baptism. And it is not ordinary blood, but the very blood of Christ, shed for our redemption to which John refers.

But this water and blood are yet present on earth. The blood of Christ was not destroyed from the earth by His death on the cross. These two terms, "water" and "blood," refer to the two Sacraments which Christ instituted, the "water" to Baptism, and the "blood" to the

Sacrament of the true body and blood of Christ. Both Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, bear witness of Christ.

This agrees well with the expression, "This is He who came" (ἦλθών). Christ came, appeared, through water and blood. One may translate (ἐν τῷ ὕδατι ... ἐν τῷ αἵματι) "with water and blood." However, one must bear in mind that this does not refer to His coming into flesh, but rather to His spiritual coming.

Christ came by His Spirit to His Church to dwell among His own. And by these means, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, He still comes and is present with His congregation. Of such spiritual coming Scripture also speaks in other places, e.g., Ephesians 2:16, 17: "And that He might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: and *came and preached* peace to you which were far off, and to them that were nigh." Paul writes to the Ephesians who were once heathen. The Gospel was brought to them, and so, says Paul, Christ, the crucified and risen Savior, "came and preached peace." Christ comes to men by the Gospel.

All exegetes admit that Ephesians 2:17 speaks of a spiritual coming of Christ. But as Jesus comes by the Gospel and dwells among men, so He comes also by the Sacraments, the other means of grace, here referred to as water and blood. Where these are in use, there Christ is present, and the Sacraments bear witness of His presence.

These two witnesses are joined by a third. "And it is the Spirit that bears witness." The Spirit is put on the same level with Baptism and the Lord's Supper as witnesses. The Sacraments are sensuous, visible means by which witness is borne for Christ. The Spirit bears audible witness for Christ, which reaches men through their hearing. And how does the Spirit bear witness? It is through the Word of God. Christ repeatedly asserted that His words were Spirit and life.

And of this Word, of this embodiment of the Spirit, it is further asserted: "And the Spirit bears witness that the Spirit is truth." The Spirit gives testimony of Himself that He is the truth. It is the Spirit of God who is bearing witness to men. How could the Spirit of God speak anything but the truth? Hence, what the Spirit testifies needs no further proof: it is of itself (*eo ipso*) divine truth. The Word of God is the embodied Spirit of God. On the basis of this passage we teach that the Word of God needs no demonstration for its truthfulness. It is in itself divine truth. It bears witness of itself that it is the truth. We bow to the witness of the Word. In it God Himself speaks to us. We need no further witness to become convinced. Whoever has the testimony of the Word in his heart has the divine assurance and asks for no more proof. It is by the Word alone that we become certain of divine truth. The Word is its own proof because it is the Word of God.

Greater detail concerning the three witnesses is now offered, which we welcome.

The text here has a number of variants, and it is somewhat difficult to determine which is the correct reading. In some of the earlier and later Bible editions we find the following words inserted into the text: "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost, and these three agree in one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one" (ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ, ὁ πατήρ, ὁ λόγος, καὶ τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα, καὶ οὗτοι οἱ τρεῖς ἐν εἰσιν. καὶ τρεῖς εἰσιν οἱ μαρτυροῦντες ἐν τῇ γῆ). These words are missing in all Greek codices except in those of the sixteenth century.

They are found in some of the Latin editions, but not before the eighth century. From this all modern interpreters have reached the conclusion that these words are spurious and are to be considered as a later interpolation. We regard a certain reading doubtful already when it occurs only in one or the other codex, while the majority of the codices do not have it. But in this case not one of the extant original Greek codices contains this reading, and therefore it is without doubt not genuine. In addition, they point out that in the Arian controversy these words never were quoted by the orthodox proponents, when they would have proved a formidable defense against the heresy of Arius.

Now, what shall we say? If we had no other information from the ancient Church, we, too, would have to conclude that these words lack the earmarks of authenticity. However, we do have some remarks of the Old Latin church fathers which obviously made use of these very words. We refer to the writings of Tertullian, Cyprian, and Phoebadius. Tertullian writes: *Contra Praxian*, c. 25, *Ita Connexus patria in filio et filii in paraclete* (and so there is a connection of the Father in the Son and of the Son in the Comforter). *Tres efficit coharrentis alterum ex alteris, qui tres unum sunt, non unus, quo modo dictum est.* (A Nicene F. Vol. 3, 621. 631)

We note here that Tertullian emphasizes the “*unum*” saying, “*unum, non unus.*” He obviously identifies the “*unum*” with the Word of Scripture.

Cyprian writes in his *De Unitate Ecclesiae* (Ante Nicene F. V. P. 423 f.): *De patre et filio et spiritu sancto scriptum est et tres unum sunt.* This is an exact quotation. “*Scriptum est*” would point to a word of Scripture, which occurs only in [I] John, ep. 5:7.

Phoebadius, bishop of Agenne in Aquitania, in his writing, *Contra Ariano*, c. 45, also names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and makes the remark: “*Unus tamen Deus omnia, quia tres unum sunt.*” The meaning is: These three are one God, since it is certain that these three are one. The latter part of the statement proves the former.

Now the question arises, What do these passages that have been quoted conclusively prove? Very obviously this, that these church fathers must have had a codex in hand in which the words which they quoted did occur. And such a codex must have been at least as old as the oldest we know of today. It must have been a manuscript of the second century. We know very little of the older codices and manuscripts. Very few of the older ones are extant. We will have to assume that in the second century every congregation had a manuscript of one or more of the Gospels. So there were once thousands of such sacred manuscripts, yet only ten of these have come down us. We must say that we lack an accurate knowledge of these older manuscripts. But so much appears certain that those words we are concerned with must have been found in the codices which were in the hands of those early North African Christians. Not only Tertullian, Cyprian, and Phoebadius knew of these words of Scripture, but also all their readers. The fathers quoted these for the purpose that their readers might reassure themselves by looking up and reading for themselves these Scripture references. Hence, the reading containing these words must have been common.

Moreover, one can easily explain how these words came to be omitted in later codices. The eye of a copyist slipped down from the first μαρτυροῦντες to the second line below, omitting then also the words between. This can, of course, not be used as a proof for our contention. It does, however, make it quite plausible how it could have happened that these important words came to be omitted. So much is certain, it is just as wrong to say these words are spurious, as to say these words are genuine. And when outward reasons do not sufficiently

support a certain reading, we must all the more depend upon inner grounds. For the time being we shall consider these words as authentic.

“The Father, the Word, and the Spirit, these three are one.” These three bear witness also that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and the only Savior of the world. And this testimony constitutes the very essence of the Christian faith. They bear witness in heaven, but evidently for the benefit of men on earth. We are to become certain of the contents of our faith. God’s heaven includes the earth. This witness bearing “in heaven” would characterize this witness as being super-mundane. It is a divine witness, higher than that of men. Of the Three that witness it is asserted that they are “one.” This would, then, also be proof for the doctrine of the Trinity. And if these Three are one in Being, then they must also be one in work and purpose.

“And there are three that bear witness on earth.” These witnesses are of a sensuous nature, perceptible to our human senses. They have earlier been mentioned, as Spirit, water, and blood, which signifies, as we have seen, the Word, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. While it cannot be properly said of these three that they are one in essence, it can nevertheless be stated that they are one in purpose (οἱ τρεῖς εἰς τὸ ἓν εἰσιν). And we are not to think of this dual witness, the one “in heaven,” the other “on earth,” as being separate. No, rather the one blends and merges with the other. That which men hear and see of it is Spirit, water, and blood, or the Word and Sacraments. But in and through these means the Triune God Himself bears witness. So we see that our means of grace are endowed with divine authority and efficacy. God would not speak to men by calling to them out of heaven. Rather He has ordained certain means, adapted to our earthly existence, through which He would communicate to us His Word and will. So the three heavenly Witnesses bear witness through the witness of men. (The “ὅτι” has the purpose of explaining the term “μαρτυροῦντες,” which follows later. But in verse 7 the expression “μαρτυροῦντες” received no further explanation, and we would have none if the words in question would be omitted. There we read first “...and the three bear witness.”) That means that they explain the same by the same (*idem per idem*).

That there are three who bear witness was said earlier already. But then follows another important explanatory statement in verse 6, namely, that through these three human witnesses on earth the great Triune God Himself bears witness. And so then a person feels rather well justified to insist that the words in question should be retained for the sake of offering a much needed connection with the foregoing.