

Divine testimony in our hearts (1 John 5:9-13)

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I recently spent some time discussing 1 John with a dozen or so parishioners. Despite the letter's quotability—who doesn't love "God is love"?—many of the participants found the letter repetitive to a fault.

Our resident attorney was particularly frustrated with the circular logic of some of the arguments. They wouldn't hold up in court. His lawyerly perspective remained relevant when we arrived in the epistle's fifth and final chapter. The language of testimony is inherently legal. We rely on the testimony of witnesses who take the stand and present the truth as they know it. The judge and jurors must multitask, listening carefully to the words of the witness while also considering the subtle factors of credibility. Do you believe what he is saying? Is her testimony trustworthy?

And that's human testimony. According to the author of 1 John, we have received more than mere mortal attestation. Because Jesus literally embodies God, the testimony we receive from him is divine testimony. That is, if you can believe it. Believers do. (Are we tripping into a circle of logic again?) But if you do not believe, you aren't just questioning the credibility of a random witness. You are questioning the credibility of God. Or rather, you are "making him a liar."

This language startled my little troop of Bible students. It made us uncomfortable. Making a liar out of God is a big deal. Indeed, it's the context of the entire letter,

which was written to encourage the Johannine community to resist the rise of false prophets. These apostates were spreading alternative theologies about the nature of the incarnation, theologies the church would come to name as heresies.

The author isn't having it. He desperately wants believers to remain steadfast to the truth as he understands it. He intuitively feels that it's not enough to point to his own testimony, however. Hence his appeal to divine testimony.

I am no lawyer, but I did love studying logic in college. I'm fuzzy on the different types of logical fallacies I learned from my philosophy professor, but I'm pretty sure someone could successfully argue that John's logic is questionable. Believe that Jesus is the Son of God because . . . Jesus says he is the Son of God.

Is the author of 1 John a credible witness? Is Jesus a credible witness? Maybe there's a time to set aside the rhetorical quibbling and check in with one's own heart. Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Perhaps the deeper question is this: Is your very own heart a credible witness?