

Chapter 12: The Authority of Jesus

John 5:19–47

Although Jesus' healing on the Sabbath brought about his persecution by the Jewish religious leaders (John 5:16), Jesus has nothing more to say about the Sabbath beyond the words he uttered in John 5:17: "My Father is working until now, and I am working." In the discourse in John 5:19–47, then, Jesus' primary intention is not to develop a theology of the Sabbath, but to explain what he meant by his Sabbath defense in John 5:17—that is, Jesus here reveals the nature of his relationship to God the Father. Healing on the Sabbath was important, but not ultimate. Instead, Jesus healed on the Sabbath to illustrate and to announce the "greater works" (John 5:20) that the Father has sent him to accomplish.¹ In this discourse, Jesus builds upon his statement in John 5:17, defining, expanding upon, and defending the idea that he works with his Father as a Son.² Through this discourse, Jesus declares that *the incarnate Son builds his kingdom by his word*.

The Works and Reign of the Incarnate Son (John 5:19–24)

We will fundamentally—and *heretically*—misunderstand Jesus' words in this discourse if we do not remember the context in which he is speaking. Jesus is here explaining the nature of his *equality* with the Father (John 5:18), not his *inferiority* to the Father, as some have taken this passage to mean. Chiefly among those who see Jesus' statements about doing "nothing of his own accord" (John 5:19) as proof of the Son's inferiority to his Father is the ancient heretic Arius, who argued that the Son was created by the Father and, therefore, not truly God in the same sense that the Father is God. In part, he made his case by appealing to the ways that Jesus himself spoke of his inability to do nothing "on [his] own" (John 5:30), as though the Son were less powerful than the Father. But others more recently have similarly stretched this passage too far by reading into this passage some kind of subordination of the Son to the Father, as though God the Son could be equal to the Father in his *nature*, but inferior (or "subordinate") in his *personhood*.³ Sadly, this explanation still leads us to the same false conclusion: if the Son is unequal with the Father in his nature *or* in his personhood, then he is unequal with the Father altogether. This is *not* what Jesus is teaching us here.

Rather than giving us a discourse on "the simple Divinity of Christ," Jesus is describing the status of "the Son of God, so far as he is manifested in the flesh."⁴ That is, this is a discourse about the *incarnate* Son (the God-man), not the eternally pre-existing *divine* Son (the Second Person of the Trinity). The Jews are attacking Jesus because they believe he has spoken blasphemously by claiming equality with the Father as a mere human being (John 5:18), so Jesus explains the way in which he is *more* than a mere human being as the incarnate Son of the Father. The point Jesus is making through this discourse is not that he, in his divine nature, is somehow inferior to his Father, but that as the God-man, he acts in perfect unity with the Father. He is not working "of his own accord" by trying to rival God from his own, independent authority apart from the Father; rather, he is working in

coordination with the Father—and he is working in coordination with the Father not as a subordinate, but as the Son.⁵

When we delve into issues of Christology, Paul’s language in Philippians 2:6–11 is helpful, where he first speaks of the divine Son as existing in equality with the Father “in the form of God” (Phil. 2:6).⁶ Then, he describes how the Son emptied himself by taking “the form of a servant” through his incarnation, “being born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:7). Then after Jesus’ humble obedience through his life and even to the point of death on a cross (Phil. 2:8), the Father exalted the humiliated, crucified God-man by giving him “the name that is above every other name” (Phil. 2:9) to reign as Lord “to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10–11). In *the form of God*, the Son is absolutely equal in power, glory, authority, and majesty with his Father, without any subordination whatsoever. In *the form of a servant* during his earthly ministry, the incarnate Son was perfectly and totally humble, submissive, and obedient to his Father. Then, in *the form of exalted servant*, Jesus Christ the God-man reigns with the Father after his ascension to finish God’s redemptive mission in this world. For clarity, we will use these three descriptions to differentiate what Jesus is saying about himself in this discourse.

The Works of the Incarnate Son

With these preliminary observations in mind, let us study Jesus’ teaching here. The first part of John 5:19 builds and expands upon John 5:17 (“My Father is working until now, and I am working”) as a revised thesis statement for this section: “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing.” Jesus does not operate independently of the Father, but because of his perfect *unity* with the Father, he does all that he sees the Father doing. This arrangement does put Jesus in a position of submissive obedience to the Father, but not because the Son *in the form of God* is inferior or subordinate to the Father. Rather, Jesus here speaks of his status *in the form of a servant*, since it was not the Father but the Son “who assumed the redemptive mission, because it was he who was executing that mission in the incarnate state. As the Son in human flesh thus engaged in his mission his eyes were ever upon his Father.” In the form of a servant, Jesus obeys the leading of his Father in heaven.

At this point, Jesus clarifies the manner in which he does only what he sees the Father doing through four “for” (or “because”) statements that follow in John 5:19–23.⁸ In the first “for” statement, Jesus explains *how* he works with his Father: “for whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise” (John 5:19). According to his humanity, Jesus indeed takes the form of a servant and refuses to act apart from the will of his Father, but according to his divine nature, Jesus does *whatever* the Father does: “there is no difference between him and his Father.” This statement obliterates any idea of subordination to the Father by the divine Son in the form of God, for Jesus insists that there is *nothing* of all that the Father does that the Son does not likewise do.

Furthermore, we see here the essence of a principle of Trinitarian theology that orthodox Christians have confessed throughout the ages, that the external works of the persons of the Trinity are *inseparable*.¹⁰ God is one (Deut. 6:4), and he acts as one God through three Persons. There are not three Gods working alongside each other, where each God does his own part; rather, whenever God works outside the intra-Trinitarian relationships between the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit (whether in creation or redemption), the actions of the three Persons are inseparable and indivisible. The Father works *in* and *through* his Son, who accomplishes *whatever* his Father is doing. And,

although Jesus does not speak explicitly about the Holy Spirit here, we must remember the testimony of John the Baptist: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it *remained* on him” (John 1:32). The Father is working *in* the Son, and the Holy Spirit *remains upon* the Son. On this verse, the church father Augustine writes:

He does not do other things likewise, like a painter copying pictures he has seen painted by someone else; nor does he do the same things differently, like the body forming letters which the mind has thought; but *Whatever the Father does, he says, the same the Son also does likewise* (Jn 5:19). “The same,” he said; and also, “likewise”; thus showing that the working of the Father and of the Son is equal and indivisible, and yet the Son’s working comes from the Father. That is why the Son cannot do anything of himself except what he sees the Father doing.¹¹

The Son does nothing of his own, apart from his Father, and the Father does nothing *except* through his Son, “for whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.”

The second “for” statement explains *why* the Father works inseparably with his Son: “For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing” (John 5:20). The Son *sees* what the Father is doing (John 5:19) because the Father *shows* the Son all that he himself is doing (John 5:20). This is a beautiful description of “the perpetual communion of the Son with the Father in his day-by-day [i.e., in the form of a servant] life (not in his pre-existence).”¹² The Father and the Son act inseparably because of the mutual love between them—not only the love of the Father to show his Son everything, but the (implied) love of the Son to do nothing of his own accord, apart from his Father. In this case, though, Jesus is speaking primarily of the love of the Father for the incarnate Son—that is, the Son in the form of a servant (cf. Matt. 3:17; 17:5).¹³ Love is at the center of the relationship between the Father and the Son, and love is the reason that “the Father does all things by [the Son’s] hand...[so that] out of Christ it will be in vain to seek the power of God.”¹⁴

The third “for” statement explains *what* the Father and the Son are doing together, in a thought that begins at the end of John 5:20, even though the “for” does not appear until John 5:21: “And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. *For* as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.” Ultimately, Jesus came to accomplish greater works than simply healing a lame man on the Sabbath. More broadly, then, the scope of the works that Jesus came to do is to raise the dead and give them life on behalf of his Father. By this, Jesus refers both the raising of the spiritually dead *and* the physically dead, as he will elaborate in John 5:25–29.¹⁵ Furthermore, Jesus intimates here that his purpose for picking a fight with the religious leaders by healing on the Sabbath was to reveal his unity with the Father as he does in this discourse. Again, it is not that Jesus is saying that the Father raises *some* from the dead and gives them life, and that the Son now raises *others* from the dead and gives them life, for the Father and the Son are not two Gods, but one God with the Holy Spirit. Instead, Jesus is saying that his works are inseparable from the Father, who accomplishes this work by the hand of his Son.

The Reign of the Incarnate Son

The fourth and final “for” statement goes untranslated in the ESV, but Jesus uses this word at the beginning of John 5:22: “[For t]he Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that

all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him” (John 5:22–23). Here, we see *to what end* the Father works inseparably in and through the Son: so that all might honor the Son just as they honor the Father. This does not mean the Father is resigning his authority or abdicating his throne as Judge, but that he is judging the world *through* the Son. The Father will in no way become “unemployed in heaven, like a private person...for [the Father] is in the Son, and works in him.”¹⁶ Or, to put it another way, “by giving all things into the hands of the Son, the Father does not retreat to a position behind the Son, but posits himself as present in the Son. God is not two but one.”¹⁷ Or, as the church father Gregory of Nyssa writes:

When we learn from Scripture that it is the God of the universe who judges all the earth, we say he is the judge of all things through the Son. And again, when we hear that the Father judges no one, we do not think that Scripture is at variance with itself. For he who judges all the earth does this through the Son to whom he has given all judgment. And everything done by the Only-begotten has reference to the Father, so that he both is the judge of all and yet judges no one. For, as was said, he has committed all judgment to the Son; and all the judgment of the Son is not something alien to the Father’s will. Hence no one can properly say either that there are two judges or that one of them is excluded from the authority and power of judgment.¹⁸

In this way, “all may honor the Son even as they honor the Father; that is, in order that those two persons who are equal in essence (5:17, 18) and in works (5:19–22) may also be equal in honor.”¹⁹ The Father sends his Son in the form of a servant so that, in response to the incarnate Son’s life, death, and resurrection, the Father might raise up his Son in the form of an *exalted* servant as the Judge and Lord who reigns over all creation. Then, as every knee bows to Jesus in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord, God the Father will be glorified *in* the glory of his incarnate, crucified, resurrected, and exalted Son, in whom the Father himself judges and reigns (Phil. 2:10–11). As we will see in John 5:27, Jesus’ role as a judge does not take place in a government with separation of powers. Jesus is the Son of Man whose judgment is connected with his everlasting *kingdom* (cf. Dan. 7:13–14). By judging, Jesus exercises his reign as King.

Indeed, it is only through this kind of robust understanding of the Trinity that we will be able to understand what Jesus says here in relationship to what he says later on in this Gospel: “I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me” (John 8:15–16). The Father judges no one, but he judges all through the Son. The Son judges no one, which is to say that he judges no one *alone* or “of his own accord” (John 5:19), but he judges only with the Father who sent him—that is, he judges as he hears from his Father (John 5:30). The Father and the Son are not two judges, but one Judge, for the external works of the Trinity are indivisible.

In what manner, then, does the incarnate Son exercise his reign? Very simply, Jesus says that he reigns and rules by his *word*: “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5:24). Our Lord rules his kingdom by his word, and we will be judged on the basis of

whether or not we respond to his word in faith. Whoever believes the word of Jesus will not pass under the sword of judgment on the last day, for whoever believes the word of Jesus has already passed from death to life. And here is the remarkable news of the gospel: the *reason* we do not come into judgment when we respond by faith is that Jesus Christ himself, the incarnate Son of God who emptied himself by taking the form of a servant in human fashion, and who then humbled himself in obedience to death on a cross, has himself come into judgment *for us*. The religious leaders do indeed succeed in their goal of killing Jesus (John 5:18), but so far from ending his kingdom, they instead establish it by making Jesus a substitutionary sacrifice who passes under the sword of judgment for the atonement and redemption of his people.

Today, Jesus Christ reigns through the proclamation of his word, for “the doctrine of the Gospel seems as a scepter to Christ, by which he governs believers whom the Father has made his subjects.”²⁰ All those who hear the word of Jesus Christ and respond in the faith have passed from death to life as citizens of a new kingdom. Neither the church nor her officers (pastors, elders, deacons) have authority in themselves, but the church only exercises the mediated authority of the word (that is, the *Scriptures*) of Jesus Christ, who alone is King in his church, by the power of the Holy Spirit. *The Book of Church Order* for the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) expresses this idea magnificently in its preface:

Jesus, the Mediator, the sole Priest, Prophet, King, Saviour, and Head of the Church, contains in Himself, by way of eminency, all the offices in His Church, and has many of their names attributed to Him in the Scriptures. He is Apostle, Teacher, Pastor, Minister, Bishop and the only Lawgiver in Zion.

It belongs to His Majesty from His throne of glory to rule and teach the Church through His Word and Spirit by the ministry of men; thus mediately exercising His own authority and enforcing His own laws, unto the edification and establishment of His Kingdom.

Christ, as King, has given to His Church officers, oracles and ordinances; and especially has He ordained therein His system of doctrine, government, discipline and worship, all of which are either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary inference may be deduced therefrom; and to which things He commands that nothing be added, and that from them naught be taken away.

Since the ascension of Jesus Christ to heaven, He is present with the Church by His Word and Spirit, and the benefits of all His offices are effectually applied by the Holy Ghost.²¹

The Kingdom belongs to the Son, through whom the Father reigns, that all might honor the Son just as they honor the Father, for the Father is glorified in his Son. Let us worship and bow down before King Jesus, to the glory and praise of God the Father!

Raising and Judging the Dead (John 5:25–30)

Jesus touched briefly on the “greater works” of raising the dead and giving them life earlier in this discourse (John 5:20–21), but he returns to elaborate on these themes now to speak of raising the dead on two levels: from spiritual death and from physical death. Not only does Jesus come to give

life *now* to those alienated from God, dead in the bondage of sin, but ultimately Jesus comes to raise those who are physically dead *in the future*, at the resurrection on the last day.

Quickening the Spiritually Dead

First, Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (John 5:25–26). In line with the previous section of this discourse, we should recognize that Jesus is *not* suggesting that the Father has life in himself to quicken (that is, to give life) *some* dead, while Jesus then quickens *other* dead, for there are not two life-givers, but only One life-giver.²² Once again, Jesus is explaining the unity of the work of the Father and the Son to give life to the dead, so that the Father quickens the dead *exclusively* through the voice of his incarnate Son. All those who hear (that is, hear by faith) the voice of the incarnate Son of God will live.

That Jesus has in view here the quickening of the spiritually dead is clear from the contrast between *this* hour, which is coming “and is now here” (John 5:25), and the hour of the final resurrection which is coming, but is *not* yet here (John 5:28–29).²³ With the coming of Jesus into the world, Jesus begins to preach and teach with his own voice with the power to give life to those who hear his voice, that by hearing and believing, they may be saved.²⁴ In line with Jesus’ previous teaching in this Gospel, Jesus is giving additional details about the new birth that he spoke of with Nicodemus in John 3:1–8. The Father raises the spiritually dead through the voice of the Incarnate Son, but also through the Spirit who gives new birth. If there are not two life-givers, then there are certainly not *three* life-givers, but only One life-giver, for the external works of the Trinity are indivisible. This work of the Trinity to raise the spiritually dead, then, continues in the age of the church, since Jesus commissioned his church to bear witness to his gospel (Acts 1:8) and to teach his disciples to obey everything that he taught us (Matt. 28:19–20). Through the preaching of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, God gives life to the spiritually dead, for “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).

Raising and Judging the Physically Dead

In addition to granting the incarnate Son to have life in himself, the Father also gives the incarnate Son “authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man” (John 5:27). In the form of the exalted servant, the Lord Jesus Christ has received all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18), and he uses this authority to judge the world. Additionally, Jesus claims (as in many other places) to be the Son of Man from Daniel 7:13–14.²⁵ There, Daniel sees this prophetic vision:

“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.” (Dan 7:13–14)

Jesus states that he receives authority to execute judgment *because* he is the Son of Man. He is the one coming with the clouds of heaven who will receive dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all

peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. Moreover, he is the one whose dominion will be everlasting, so that it will never pass away. As part of that office of the Son of Man prophesied in the book of Daniel (and a part of his office as King), Jesus will judge the dead.

At some point in the future (“an hour is coming...”), those who are physically dead in their tombs will hear the voice of the Son of Man summoning them to their judgment: “all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28–29). By “those who have done good” and “those who have done evil,” Jesus does not imply that salvation comes through doing good works. Instead, salvation comes through believing the word of Jesus as the one sent by the Father (John 5:24). Rather, these phrases summarize the entire course of the lives of believers and nonbelievers, so the “one class is marked by the good works that spring from faith; the other by the worthless works that spring from unbelief.”²⁶ Faith alone in Christ alone justifies us, and only those who are justified are also sanctified to grow in grace to do the good works that God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:8–10). As John Calvin writes, “And indeed we do not deny that the faith which justifies us is accompanied by an earnest desire to live well and righteously; but we only maintain that our confidence cannot rest on any thing else than on the mercy of God alone.”²⁷ This final judgment on the last day represents the entirety of the reign of Christ as King—that is, Christ in the form of an *exalted* servant. On that day, Christ will finalize his judgment of all people from all ages throughout human history. Those whom Christ quickens spiritually to believe in him and his word will go to the resurrection of life, but those who remain in their sin and rebellion against the reign of Christ will go to the resurrection of judgment.²⁸

But, in regard to his judgment, Jesus again returns to the theme that he began at the beginning of his discourse: “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 5:30). Once again, it is critical to recognize that Jesus is not speaking of himself in the form of God, but of his judgment in the form of a servant. As a (human) servant, he humbly obeys everything that the Father asks him to do, so that “he does nothing by human power, because he has for his guide and director God who dwells in him.”²⁹ Just as Jesus does everything that he “sees the Father doing” (John 5:19), since the Father “shows him all that he himself is doing” (John 5:20), so also Jesus judges not apart from the Father, but according to what he hears from his Father. “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22), but the incarnate Son judges all according to what he hears from his Father so that not “a single word that Jesus utters in stating a judgment, whether it be on men, believers or unbelievers, or on matters or subjects of any kind, or on his own person and work, ever deviates from, or clashes with, the word of his Father.”³⁰ In this way, the Father judges *through* the Son, and the Son judges *for* the Father.

The Witnesses of Jesus (John 5:30–47)

At this point, Jesus shifts the courtroom imagery. No longer does he speak about himself as the Judge, but about the way in which the Jewish religious leaders have put him on trial, or, as C. S. Lewis put it, “in the dock.”³¹ Jesus begins by acknowledging that, in the present matter, he cannot act as witness for himself to exonerate his claim of equality with God: “If I bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true” (John 5:31).³² Now, this statement is virtually identical to the charge that the

Pharisees bring against Jesus in John 8:13: “You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is not true,” but there, Jesus responds by saying that his testimony *is* true: “Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from and where I am going” (John 8:14). Why does Jesus say here in John 5 that his testimony about himself is *not* true, but then say in John 8:14 that his testimony about himself *is* true?

Obviously, Jesus is not saying here in John 5:31 that his testimony is false. “True” in this case has more to do with its validity and acceptance in the courtroom, for no one has ever been allowed to exonerate himself by his own testimony alone. In the same way, Jesus is here saying that his testimony is not validly admissible in court if he bears witness concerning himself. In John 8, on the other hand, he is saying that his testimony is nevertheless truthful (even if not validly admissible in a courtroom setting), contrary to the accusations of the Jews that he is lying.³³

Another Witness

The reason that Jesus acknowledges that his own testimony concerning himself is not true is that he is able to summon other witnesses who will give testimony concerning him, beginning with “another” witness: “There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true” (John 5:32). This is not John the Baptist, whom Jesus mentions next (John 5:33–36), for “the testimony that I have is greater than that of John” (John 5:36). This “another” witness is God the Father, whom Jesus will call as a witness in John 5:37–38.³⁴ In addition to God the Father, Jesus will call four other witnesses: John the Baptist (John 5:33–36a), the works that Jesus does (John 5:36b), the Scriptures (John 5:39), and Moses himself (John 5:45–47). Nevertheless, Jesus begins by speaking of the Father as “another witness” because the Father’s witness alone is supreme, and the authority of all the other witnesses rest on the authority of the Father: “it is the Father who testifies by means of all the others.”³⁵

John the Baptist

As Jesus summons these other witnesses whom the Father has sent to testify to him, he begins with John the Baptist, whom the Pharisees already interviewed (cf. John 1:19–27): “You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light” (John 5:33–35). John the Baptist freely acknowledged that he was not the Christ (John 1:20), and that Jesus *is* the Christ (John 1:29–34). In this way, the Baptist “has borne witness to the truth.” It is likely that Jesus begins with John the Baptist as a mutually recognized source of authority, for even the Pharisees themselves “were willing to rejoice for a while in his light” (John 5:35). By calling John the Baptist a “lamp,” Jesus recognizes that John’s “his witness was small (yet important) and of a temporary nature. He was a lamp that exuded light, but he was not the light itself.”³⁶ Still, Jesus refuses to point to John the Baptist as his ultimate witness, since as the Son of God, he cannot rest exclusively on the testimony of human beings, and he only calls John the Baptist at all “so that you may be saved” (John 5:34). R. C. H. Lenski poignantly observes, “Thus as ever when Jesus deals with his enemies, he holds out salvation to them.”³⁷

Jesus’ Works

Second, Jesus points to his own works as bearing witness that the Father has sent him: “But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me” (John 5:36). This is one of the few reminders in this discourse that Jesus is still defending his healing of the lame man on the Sabbath day from John 5:1–18. He points to this great work as a witness to the fact that the Father has sent him, for who else would be able to accomplish such a great work? In the debates between the Jews about whether or not Jesus is the Christ, this same logic will be repeated by those who ask, “When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?” (John 7:31). Jesus does not want people following him *only* because of the signs that he performs (John 2:23–25, 4:48), but he performs these works as a witness to the fact that the Father has sent him.

The Father

It is at this point that Jesus calls the Father as his witness: “And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent” (John 5:37–38). Although the Father did boom his approval from heaven at the baptism of Jesus, declaring, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17), it is unlikely that this is what Jesus is referring to, for Jesus immediately states that the Jewish religious leaders have *never* heard the Father’s voice. Rather, Jesus is using “heard” in the same sense that he used earlier to refer to *faith*: “whoever *hears* my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life” (John 5:24), and “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will *hear* the voice of the Son of God, and those who *hear* will live” (John 5:25). They have not *heard* the voice of the Father, nor have they seen him, nor do they have the Father’s word abiding in them, “for you do not believe the one whom he has sent.” If they *had* heard the voice of the Father, or *seen* the image of the Father, or found the *word* of the Father abiding in them, they they would have believed in Jesus. Their unbelief in Jesus, then, stands as proof that they do not know the Father at all.

What this means is that God the Father is a disputed witness between Jesus and the Jews. Jesus (rightly) insists that the Father bears witness about Jesus as the Son, but the Jews do not believe Jesus in this regard. Remember, Jesus’ claim to equality with God by claiming God as his own Father was the immediate cause of this discourse (John 5:18). So, while the Father is the “another” witness (John 5:32) whose testimony is authoritative, Jesus cannot rest his case at this point. He must press on to demonstrate the way in which the Father has borne testimony concerning Jesus as the Son: through the Scriptures, by the prophetic testimony of Moses.³⁸

The Scriptures

In John 5:39–40, Jesus appeals to the Scriptures while admonishing the Jewish religious leaders for their mishandling and misinterpretation of the Scriptures: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.” Notice carefully the way in which Jesus speaks about the Scriptures. He does not suggest in the least that these religious leaders should *avoid* the Scriptures, but he criticizes the fact that they do not see the Father’s witness by his word in the Scriptures. They are blind men staring intently at the *Mona Lisa*. The problem is not where they are looking, but what

they see (or fail to see) when they look. Despite all their study, they refuse to come to Jesus (as the Scriptures insist) that they might have life.

This statement tells us that we must read the entire Bible—including the Old Testament, which is what Jesus is talking about here when he speaks of the “Scriptures,” since the New Testament was not written yet—in the light of Jesus Christ. Everything written in the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms bear witness to Jesus (Luke 24:44). This does not mean that we need to twist the Scriptures to force-fit them into the image of Jesus but that, rightly interpreted, the Old Testament Scriptures point forward to Christ’s coming. As Beasley-Murray writes, “The Scriptures of both covenants bear testimony to Christ. That is their glory. It is also their limitation. They point to him, who alone can bind us to the Father and give the life.”³⁹ The Scriptures *do* provide eternal life, but not on their own. The Scriptures provide eternal life through bearing witness to Jesus Christ, in whom is life. When we hear the voice of the Son of God in the Scriptures and believe, it is in the Christ to whom the Scriptures testify that we find eternal life (John 5:25–26).

False Witnesses

Next, Jesus does not call himself another witness, but exposes the foolishness of the false witnesses that the Pharisees *do* listen to: “I do not receive glory from people. But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” (John 5:41–44). Ultimately, they do not listen directly to the Father’s voice speaking in the Scriptures because they do not care what the Father has to say. Rather, they listen to the opinions and traditions of men, seeking the glory that comes from obeying the authoritative traditions and submitting to the powerful leaders who have come before them. They do not recognize the witness of the Father because they do not care what the Father has to say, since the Father’s glory is not what they value.

Moses

Strictly speaking, Jesus does not call Moses as a witness, but as an accuser. The Jewish religious leaders believe that they are the disciples of Moses (John 9:28), but Jesus insists that Moses would not claim them as his own: “Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” (John 5:45–47). This is a remarkable claim, for Moses interceded for the people of Israel for their sin during his lifetime (Ex. 32:30–32; Num. 14:13–19; 21:7–9; Deut. 9:13–29).⁴⁰ But, Moses wrote about Jesus, and though the religious leaders give themselves to the study of Moses’ writings, they remain blind and hard-hearted to the glory of Jesus. For this reason, Moses will accuse all those who reject Jesus of rebelling against the words that he wrote. And if the religious leaders refuse even to listen to the writings of Moses, then in what way will they be able to listen to *his* words?

The Witnesses of Jesus

This is a pivotal passage in the Gospel of John. Here, as the opposition against Jesus begins to rise to the point of seeking to put Jesus to death (John 5:18), Jesus defines his relationship to the Father (John 5:19–30) and summons the witnesses to defend him in his person and work (John 5:31–47). In

this discourse, Jesus confronts the Jewish religious leaders with a choice: they can repent of their rebellion against God’s own Son and listen to his words, honoring not only Jesus but the Father who sent Jesus, or they can persist in the rebellion and rejection of Jesus. If they choose the latter, Jesus will condemn them to the resurrection of judgment on the last day (John 5:29), and Moses himself will accuse them for their wickedness (John 5:45). But if Jesus quickens us by the new birth of the Holy Spirit, we will listen to Jesus’ words and believe them, so that Jesus will raise us upon the last day to the resurrection of life (John 5:29).

In the words of the Psalmist, “Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Ps. 2:10–12). Repent and believe upon the Son, to the glory of God the Father!

Discussion Questions

1. Orthodox Christianity confesses that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. As the Son of God (that is, in the form of God), he is fully equal with the Father, but in his humanity (that is, in the form of a servant), he is obedient and submissive to his Father in heaven. How does this principle help us to understand what Jesus teaches about his relationship to the Father in this passage? Why is it so critical to avoid making God the Son, in his divinity, inferior to the Father? Why is it so critical to recognize the way that Jesus Christ, in his humanity, is inferior, subordinate, and submissive to the Father?
2. Explain the nature of Christ’s reign as king over his church through his word. What does that mean in regard to the authority of pastors and elders in the church? What does that tell us about church discipline?
3. How are the quickening of the spiritually dead connected to the resurrection of the physically dead? In light of the fact that our ultimate resurrection is still to come, what can we expect in the way of ongoing sin in our lives? What can we expect about our sin, our bodies, and our minds after we are resurrected?
4. When Jesus summons the witnesses who will give testimony about himself, what do we learn about the relationship between the Scriptures and Jesus? How does that inform the way that we read the Old Testament? How does this inform the way that we read the New Testament? Is it possible to make an idol out of the Bible? How do we ensure that the Bible directs us to Christ and does not become an end in itself?

Notes

1. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 196.
2. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 378.
3. “...the Father and the Son relate to one another as a father and son relate to one another in a human

family: the father directs and has authority over the son, and the son obeys and is responsive to the directions of the father....The Son and Holy Spirit are equal in deity to God the Father, but they are subordinate in their roles.” (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 249.)

4. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 198. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xi.iii.html>>

5. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 192–93.

6. Augustine, *The Trinity (De Trinitate)*, 2nd ed., trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991) Book II, Chapter 1.1–3, p. 98–99.

7. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 380.

8. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 251.

9. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 199. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xi.iii.html>>

10. “Thus the holy Trinity brings to effect every operation in a similar way. It is not by separate action according to the number of the Persons; but there is one motion and disposition of the good will which proceeds from the Father, through the Son, to the Spirit. For we do not call those who produce a single life three life-givers; nor do we say they are three good beings who are seen to share the same goodness; nor do we speak of them in the plural in reference to all their other attributes. In the same way we cannot enumerate as three gods those who jointly, inseparably, and mutually exec is their divine power and activity of overseeing us and the whole creation.” (Gregory of Nyssa, “An Answer to Ablabius: That We Should Not Think of Saying There are Three Gods,” in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy with Cyril C. Richardson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1954), 262.)

11. Augustine, *The Trinity*, Book II, Chapter 1.3, p. 99.

12. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 76. The words “i.e., in the form of a servant” are my own parenthetical addition to clarify this quotation in the context of the consistent language we are using in this chapter.

13. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 199. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xi.iv.html>>

14. *Ibid.*

15. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 382–83.

16. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 201. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xi.iv.html>>

17. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 197.

18. Gregory of Nyssa, “An Answer to Ablabius,” 262–63.

19. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 199.

20. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 202–03. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xi.iv.html>>

21. “Preface to the Book of Church Order,” *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 6th ed. (2016 reprint), published by The Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (Lawrenceville, GA: Committee on Discipleship Ministries, 2016).

22. Gregory of Nyssa, “An Answer to Ablabius,” 262.

23. So Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 199; however, Hendriksen argues that Jesus here refers to the first resurrection that John writes about in Revelation 20:4–6, which, in my judgment, does not fit Jesus’ words here.

24. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 205. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xi.v.html>>

25. Some (such as Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 395–96), argue that the phrase Jesus uses here

should be translated as “man’s son” rather than the title, “Son of Man,” from Daniel 7:13, since in every other use of the title “Son of Man” in the New Testament, the Greek includes an article before “Son” and “Man” (*ho huios tou anthrōpou*) while this phrase does not use any articles (*huios anthrōpou*). There are many reasons to dismiss this argument, however, with the most persuasive argument being that the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) uses the form without articles in Daniel 7:13. For more, see Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 259.

26. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 398.

27. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 210. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xi.v.html>>

28. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 208–09. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xi.v.html>>

29. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 211. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xi.vi.html>>

30. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 401.

31. “The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defence for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God’s acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock.” (C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 244.)

32. The ESV has, “If I *alone* bear witness,” but the word “alone” is not found in the Greek.

33. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 402–03.

34. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 78.

35. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 214.

36. Köstenberger, *John*, 191. cf. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 261: “Though not the light (*phōs*), he was a light-bearer, a lamp (*lynchnos*).”

37. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 405.

38. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 413.

39. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 81.

40. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 79.