

Chapter 43: The Commission of Jesus

John 20:19–31

What now? At this point, Jesus has finished everything related to his estate of humiliation in his earthly ministry (John 19:30), and he is resurrected from the dead (John 20:9). Jesus insists that he must ascend to his Father (John 20:17), but what about the disciples whom Jesus leaves behind? What comes next for them? How should the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus affect their lives moving forward? After devoting the last few years of their lives to following Jesus, what should they do now? As we will see in John 20:19–31, Jesus has a specific mission in mind for his disciples. After the ascension, Jesus will not reveal himself to the world visibly, but through the testimony of his disciples. Up to this point, Jesus has borne witness about himself directly (cf. John 8:13–18; 17:6; 18:37). When Jesus ascends to his Father, he will continue to lead his people by his word, he will do so through the power of his Spirit and the his testimony of his church (John 10:14–16; 14:23–24; 16:12–15; 17:11–20). It is not that Jesus will cease to reveal himself to the world after his ascension, but that he will change the *way* in which he does it: *Jesus reveals himself through the proclamation of his word.*

Jesus Sends His Church (John 20:19–23)

As we discussed in our study of the previous passage, John notes at three points that the resurrected Jesus meets with his people on Sunday, “the first day of the week.” The first reference to “the first day of the week” in John 20:1 perhaps does not seem more significant than simply to connect how many days has passed since Jesus’ crucifixion and death. In the second reference, however, John places heavy stress on the day of the week when Jesus meets with his disciples: “On the evening of that day, the first day of the week...” (John 20:19). It is not enough to state that it is still the evening of *that* day, but, just so there is no confusion, John clarifies beyond all doubt: this is “the first day of the week.” We will return to this theme later.

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

Here is the full verse: “On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you’” (John 20:19). There is some debate about which “disciples” are present at this encounter with Jesus. Usually, “disciples” refers to the Twelve, with the only clear exception being in John 6 where John contrasts the many “disciples” who fall away from Jesus (John 6:60, 61, 66) against the “Twelve” who continue to follow him (John 6:67, 70, 71). Judas is already dead (cf. Matt. 27:3–10), and we later learn that Thomas, “one of the Twelve” (John 20:24), was not present at this meeting either.² According to John’s general usage of the word *disciples*, it is most likely that the other ten out of the Twelve are the only disciples present; however, John could possibly mean to include followers of Jesus beyond the Twelve by this word as well.

These disciples gather themselves behind locked doors “for fear of the Jews.” Certainly, John tells us that the disciples are protecting themselves behind closed doors to suggest some kind of weakness or lack of faith, but we should not go too far in criticizing them. Gathering together at all is dangerous, and even Jesus did not thrust himself into every dangerous situation he possibly could have as he awaited his “hour” for going to the cross (e.g., John 7:1–13). John Calvin offers a better interpretation of the situation when he writes, “This example is worthy of notice; for, though they are less courageous than they ought to have been, still they do not give way to their weakness” by refusing entirely to gather together.³ The crucifixion and the resurrection have shaken the disciples deeply, and they are seeking to remain faithful to Jesus in the middle of a highly uncertain and dangerous set of circumstances.

Whatever we might think about the disciples’ hiding behind locked doors, Jesus does not criticize or condemn them when he arrives. Instead, John tells us that, when Jesus arrives, he instead speaks a word of comfort: “Peace be with you.” This was (and still is) a common greeting for the Jews, and yet, these words are entirely different when they come from Jesus, for he alone “actually gives what the word says.” Jesus does not speak in vain, promising peace when none can be found. On the contrary, Jesus is greeting them with an announcement that he has secured that peace through his life, death, and resurrection. George Beasley-Murray captures well the full range of this *peace*:

Never had that “common word” been so filled with meaning as when Jesus uttered it on Easter evening. All that the prophets had poured into *shalom* as the epitome of the blessings of the kingdom of God had essentially been realized in the redemptive deeds of the incarnate Son of God, “lifted up” for the salvation of the world. His “Shalom!” on Easter evening is the complement of “It is finished” on the cross, for the peace of reconciliation and life from God is now imparted. “Shalom!” accordingly is supremely the Easter greeting. Not surprisingly it is included, along with “grace,” in the greeting of every epistle of Paul in the NT.⁵

Through Jesus, God fulfilled his promises of bringing peace into this strife-filled world.

The Presence of Jesus

But how did Jesus actually get *into* the room with his disciples? The locked doors should have kept away foes and friends alike, and yet, without a word of warning, Jesus suddenly stands in the midst of his disciples speaking to them a word of peace. Some have suggested that Jesus made a theatrical show of his entrance, but that in reality he simply sneaks in when people are not looking. Others have offered detailed metaphysical explanations of how Jesus can now pass through doors after the resurrection. Lutherans, for example, argue that Jesus’ human nature has now received the qualities of his divine nature so that he is omnipresent *bodily* just as he is omnipresent *spiritually*. This theological perspective shapes even their view of the Lord’s Supper, so that Lutherans confess their belief that the physical body and blood of Jesus are “in, with, and under” the bread and the wine. For Lutherans, this passage seems to prove that Jesus is everywhere bodily—here, with his disciples, and every Sunday morning in the Lord’s Supper.

Although faithful Lutherans are our brothers in Christ from whom we can learn much, we (the Reformed) believe that they are mistaken on this point for several reasons.⁶ First, John does not tell us

only that Jesus suddenly “stood” among us, but that he “came” and stood among them. This word suggests that Jesus was *not* already with them bodily, but that he then *came* so that he then *was* with them bodily. Second, Jesus speaks extensively in the Gospel of John about how he must “go away” from them, out of the world, and return to his Father (e.g., John 8:21; 13:36; 14:2–4, 25, 28; 16:5–7, 16–22, 28; 20:17). Certainly, Jesus will continue to abide in and with his people in some sense, but he speaks exclusively of doing so through his word and his Spirit (e.g., John 14:15–24), a theme at the heart of this particular passage. Taken together, this teaches us that Jesus now dwells *bodily* in heaven, but that he dwells *spiritually* in heaven *and* on earth with his people. Therefore, the Lord’s Supper is not a sacrament when Jesus Christ gives us his body and blood “in, with, and under” the bread and the wine; rather, this is a time when the Holy Spirit unites us spiritually to our Lord Jesus Christ, in the fullness of his body and blood, *in the heavenly places* (Eph. 1:20; 2:6).⁷ The great hope of the Christian, then, is that Jesus will one day return *bodily* into this world, and that we will dwell with him not only spiritually (as we do now), but in the glory of his bodily presence forever.

Third, Christians throughout the ages have affirmed the wisdom and biblical faithfulness of the definition that came from the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) which insists that Christ’s two natures (human and divine) are united together in one person “unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, and inseparably.” To be fair, Lutherans would argue that the Reformed *divide* and *separate* the humanity of Christ from his divinity when we insist that his human nature is currently limited to heaven; however, it was always the case that the divine nature of Christ expanded infinitely *beyond* his humanity, and Lutherans would agree with this—at least, up until the resurrection. It is at the resurrection that Lutherans believe Jesus’ human nature gained divine attributes such as omnipotence. This is where our disagreement lies, for this would seem to mean that the humanity of Jesus becomes *confused* with his divine nature, and that his humanity therefore *changes* into something that no longer has the limitations of created, human nature. Instead, we believe that the glorified body of Jesus will be the same kind of glorified body that we will take one day (1 John 3:2) without gaining all the attributes of the divine nature.

In the end, all of us are talking about heavenly mysteries that we cannot fully comprehend, and we must both continue to search the Scriptures on this point. This is a sufficiently important doctrine that we may need to separate into different fellowships; however, this is not sufficient to divide altogether. The Lutherans and the Reformed are brethren who emerged in different ways out of the Reformation, and we pray that the day will come when we can reconcile fully. Until then, let us continue to love, respect, and dialog with one another on this (and many other) points regarding the gospel of Jesus.

To return back to our original question of how Jesus enters this room, the best answer is that we do not know. Clearly, this is a miracle where Jesus both *comes* and then *stands* in the midst of his disciples, but there is simply not enough information to speculate beyond that. As John Calvin writes, “when the Lord closes his holy lips, [we] also shall at once close the way of inquiry.”⁸

The Wounds of Jesus

After speaking to them a word of peace, Jesus shows them his wounds: “When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord” (John 20:20). By “hands,” John means that Jesus showed the disciples his wrists. In both Hebrew and Greek, the word for *hand* includes the wrists, which is where Romans drove the nails, since the palms

of the hands were not able to support the weight of the crucifixion victim.⁹ By showing these wounds from his crucifixion, Jesus both identifies himself as the same man whom they saw die three days earlier and also demonstrates that he is a real human being with a real body who has undergone a real, bodily resurrection.¹⁰ This is not a lookalike, nor a ghost, nor a spirit who takes the form of a human being. This is Jesus Christ in the flesh—crucified, dead, buried, and now resurrected from the dead.

Additionally, these wounds demonstrate the reality of the word of peace that Jesus had spoken to them: “These holy wounds proclaim that God is at peace with us. They are the seals which attest this objective peace. The peace thus pronounced upon the disciples by Jesus is an absolution.”¹¹ Jesus has borne all of our sins, and now he is resurrected, proclaiming that our sins are therefore forgiven so that we are at peace with God.

The Commission of Jesus

Jesus repeats his word of peace, but with a mandate: “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you’” (John 20:21). It is no accident that Jesus declares his word of peace twice, once before showing the disciples his wounds and once afterwards. The peace that we have with God was not cheap, for it cost the Son of God his life on the cross. God does not merely turn a blind eye to our sin, and neither does he offer terms of peace without just cause, for God will not set aside justice and righteousness in order to come to peace with us. Indeed, peace between us and God would be impossible apart from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Mere forgiveness, however, is not the extent of God’s plan and purpose for sending Jesus into the world. After securing our forgiveness and peace, Jesus now sends us on a mission—that is, on *his* mission. Just as the Father has sent the Son, so now the Son sends his disciples into the world. The relational and missional unity of the Father and the Son has been at the heart of the Gospel of John, and now the disciples find themselves enfolded into that unity: “As the Father, in sending his Son, continues to stand behind him and to take part in his work (cf., e.g., 8:16, 29), so also Jesus’ being sent by the Father remains in force in the mission of his disciples, who continue his work on earth (cf. 14:12ff.).”¹² George Beasley-Murray observes that each Gospel “ends with a commission of the risen Lord” that reflects the unique emphases of that Gospel, and then he adds that the “sending of the Son into the world by the Father is a constant theme of this Gospel.”¹³ In this commission, Jesus ties together everything he has taught about himself into a mission that he passes on to his disciples.

Jesus does not mean, of course, that we will imitate his mission in its entirety, nor that we will replicate his priestly work by offering himself as a substitute, atoning sacrifice for sinners. Instead, Jesus is sending his disciples to *announce* what he alone has accomplished: “they are to be possessors of the Lord’s peace because as his witnesses and messengers they are to dispense this very gift of peace in a peaceless world.”¹⁴ Hendriksen describes the similarities and differences between the mission of the Son and the mission of the disciples this way: “*The commissioning authority is the same; the message is the same (nevertheless, there is this difference: Jesus through his atonement makes the message possible; the apostles simply proclaim it!); and the men to whom it is proclaimed are the same. Hence, ‘just as...so.’*”¹⁵ Our job is not to *create* peace, for Jesus has already accomplished that. Instead, we are to *proclaim* the peace that Jesus has won to a warring world.

The Holy Spirit of Jesus

Before giving any further instructions about this mission, Jesus stops to equip his disciples for their task: “And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:22). The main difficulty for interpreting this question lies in asking how this reception of the Holy Spirit connects with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in Acts 2. Some argue that this is John’s description of Pentecost, whether because he writes from a conflicting tradition or because he is portraying the giving of the Spirit in theological (even if not perfectly chronological) terms.¹⁶ Others suggest that Jesus here portrays the *coming* outpouring of the Spirit through the symbolic gesture of breathing.¹⁷ Under this perspective, commentators note that the text does not tell us explicitly that Jesus actually *gives* the Spirit here. Instead, he is telling them and demonstrating to them that they *must* receive the Holy Spirit, which he will not give to them until the Day of Pentecost.

In my judgment, it is better to see this as a genuine giving of the Holy Spirit, although not to the same degree as on the Day of Pentecost. This does not mean that Jesus is only giving a *part* of the Holy Spirit, for the Holy Spirit cannot be divided up into parts.¹⁸ Rather, this giving of the Holy Spirit is simply *different* than the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost.¹⁹ By breathing, Jesus does something very significant. First, Jesus echoes the life-giving *breath* of God from Genesis 2:7 and Ezekiel 37:5–14.²⁰ Second, Jesus personally directs the *wind* of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 3:3–6) toward his disciples. Although Jesus’ actions are symbolic, it is difficult to see how they are *only* symbolic in this context. By breathing, Jesus is adding an outward sign to confirm the reality of his giving them the Spirit.²¹

We might contrast this passage with Jesus’ sermon during the Booth of Tabernacles, where Jesus urged any who were thirsty to come to him and drink (John 7:37–38). There, though, John was careful to tell us that Jesus was only *promising*, but not yet *giving*, the Holy Spirit: “Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:39). Now, after the resurrection, Jesus *is* glorified, and John no longer writes with the careful qualifications about the coming of the Spirit. John gives us every impression that Jesus is actually giving the Holy Spirit to his disciples here, so there is no compelling reason to restrict this action to mere symbolism.

Still, this giving of the Spirit is limited in ways that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost is not. At Pentecost, the ascended Christ pours out his Holy Spirit on “all flesh” (Acts 2:17), leading to a mass conversion of people who had not previously believed in Christ (Acts 2:36–41). Here, Jesus gives his Spirit only to his disciples, and only for the sake of equipping them for their mission.²² Therefore, to understand what Jesus is giving to his disciples, we must continue reading Jesus’ own definition of the nature and scope of this gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel of Jesus

Jesus continues, saying, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (John 20:23). Jesus here uses stronger verbs than our English translations reflect. The word is not merely to “forgive” sins,” but to “to dismiss, to send away the sins”; likewise, Jesus uses something stronger than “withhold forgiveness,” but to “to hold fast with strength,’ ‘to retain’” so that the “sins are held fast upon the sinner, fixed upon him so that he cannot

escape from them now or ever.”²³ What a weighty calling and responsibility! It is no wonder that Jesus must give his disciples the Holy Spirit if he expects them to do something like this. But what exactly does this work entail? Does Jesus really delegate authority to dismiss and to retain sins as the personal rights of his disciples? No human being can truly see into the heart of another, so what happens if the church makes a mistake in this regard? Will hypocrites go free? Will wrongly excommunicated saints be condemned?

The rest of the New Testament offers a fuller picture of what Jesus describes here in summary form. It is not that the institutional church has unlimited authority to forgive or condemn sinners, for Christ retains that authority for himself. God is the Judge, and he is the one who justifies the ungodly (e.g., Rom. 4:5; 8:33). The authority of the church, then, is not so much as the tribunal that judges the world during this life (cf. 1 Cor. 6:2), but as the pillar and buttress of truth (1 Tim. 3:15). That is, Jesus gives the church the responsibility and the agency of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1), and Jesus charges us to make an open statement of the truth (2 Cor. 4:2). We preach God’s condemnation against the world and the free offer of salvation and forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ. This is not just one more opinion in the marketplace of ideas, but a message that is backed with all the authority and power of God himself, for the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16). Whoever hears and believes will be saved, but whoever rejects the message will be condemned. John Calvin summarizes this idea well: “In short, properly speaking, it is [Christ] alone who forgives sins through his apostles and ministers.”²⁴ Note the connection between our work and Christ’s work: it is Christ alone who forgives, but he does it *through* his apostles and ministers.

In this sense, the church possesses real authority—the authority of God’s word. We do not possess authority that is deposited in us to use as we see fit, but we possess authority to declare and to minister God’s word. Our commission is to proclaim that gospel to the whole world as we await the return of Jesus. This is another reason we need the Holy Spirit, for the Holy Spirit not only speaks by his word, but also because the Holy Spirit alone gives the gift of faith to those who hear the word.²⁵ Apart from the Holy Spirit, we would have no word to preach, no faith compelling us to preach, and no fruit from our preaching. Unless Jesus gives the Holy Spirit, gospel ministry is an impossible task.

The Officers of Jesus

But here we come to another question. Who specifically possesses this power and authority? This is where the question of attendance at this gathering (as mentioned above) can affect our understanding of Jesus’ mandate. If Jesus entrusts this mission *only* to ten of his disciples, does this mean that the mission of proclaiming Jesus’ peace in the world is limited to the apostles? For example, to take this idea one step further, does the fact that Thomas is not present at this gathering (John 20:24) mean that even he will be excluded from this mission, as some commentators suggest? Or, on the other hand, if there are instead other disciples present who are *not* a part of the Twelve, does Jesus give this mandate indiscriminately to every disciple in his church without distinction? These questions touch on the validity and authority of officers in the church: If Jesus has entrusted his mission to his *church*, why do we need officers *within* the church who exclusively execute specific functions in that mission?

On one side of the spectrum, Roman Catholics emphasize the unique authority that Jesus Christ gave to his apostles, and then they claim that the apostolic authority of the first apostles extends

through down the institutional church all the way to the present day. Therefore, it is the ordained priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church—and the priesthood alone—who possesses this apostolic ministry. The only way to be forgiven is through the rite of confession and by receiving absolution of sins from a Roman Catholic priest. The believer does not relate directly to our great High Priest Jesus Christ through faith, but only through Rome’s priesthood. On the other side of the spectrum, low-church believers insist that this office belongs to *all* Christian, so that the ordination of any individual Christian to a unique office is an intrusion on the authority of Jesus Christ.

Between these two extremes, it is much better to recognize that King Jesus *does* establish various offices in his church (cf. Eph. 4:11), while also recognizing that Jesus does not delegate *carte blanche* authority to those officers. It is one thing to ordain pastors, ruling elders, and deacons in the church, and quite another thing to insist that no one can be saved except by the authoritative blessing of these officers. Again, the authority of the church—and, therefore, the authority of officers within the church—is only ministerial and declarative. We may only minister and declare the word that King Jesus has spoken in his Scriptures. Jesus Christ “alone keeps possession of the whole power, while [his officers] claim nothing for themselves but the ministry” of the word and sacraments.²⁶ The officers have a special role in proclaiming what King Jesus has spoken, but they do not take away the prerogative of King Jesus alone to forgive.

Additionally, it is helpful to note that ordaining officers within the church does not set apart a certain group of believers as though they existed on a different spiritual tier altogether. Rather, officers in the church are body members (i.e., organs) who execute a specific set of functions—a set of functions that belong to the *whole* body of Christ. In other words, pastors and elders do not exclusively hold authority apart from the rest of the church. Rather, pastors and elders execute authority on behalf of the whole church. Just as the heart pumps blood *for the whole body*, and just as the lungs receive oxygen *for the whole body*, and just as the stomach digests food *for the whole body*, so the officers of the church execute the declarative and ministerial authority of the church *for the whole body of Christ*. The authority belongs to the Christ (not the officers), and Christ gives the authority to the whole church (not the officers); however, the officers alone execute that authority on behalf of Christ and for the whole church.²⁷

Jesus No Longer Reveals Himself by Sight (John 20:24–29)

At this point, we might ask a simple question: *Why* does Jesus send his church? Wouldn’t it be much more impressive to reveal himself directly, visibly, and bodily to the world, in the way that he has done to his disciples? Apart from sight, it will be difficult for the world to believe in Jesus. In fact, as we will see in this next section, even one of his own disciples struggles to believe that Jesus has risen from the dead apart from seeing him, so why would the rest of the world be *more* willing to believe unless they see Jesus for themselves? With these questions in mind, let us continue reading. Here, John informs us that one of the Twelve (other than Judas) was not present at this first appearance of Jesus to his disciples:

[24] Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came.

[25] So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and

place my hand into his side, I will never believe.” (John 20:24–25)

We are not told the reason that Thomas was not present; however, from Thomas’s stubbornness to believe the testimony of his fellow disciples, it seems clear that Thomas did not believe that anything further would or could happen with Jesus.²⁸ Why, then, would he gather with the other disciples if their Master has died? What commonality do they still share now that Jesus is gone? Why should they not get on with their individual lives?

Thomas’s unbelief is unique, for “nobody else in the New Testament makes demands like these before believing.”²⁹ Furthermore, his unbelief withstands the fervent, testimony of the other disciples, which we might more accurately translate as, “So the other disciples *kept telling* him...” (John 20:25).³⁰ Whether because of shock from the trauma of seeing his beloved Master crucified, or because of a thoroughgoing skepticism that cannot imagine believing something like this without sufficient proof (as commentators variously suggest), Thomas doggedly insists that he will not believe until he can physically touch the wounds of the resurrected Jesus. Although Thomas is not to be commended for his lack of faith, we may nevertheless rejoice that we may benefit from the account of Thomas’s unbelief. The story of Thomas demonstrates that the disciples were not the gullible fools that modern people sometimes imagine that they were. They may not have understood as much of the science about life and death that we do, but these ancient people understood the difference between life and death, and they knew that dead people do not come back to life. The idea that the disciples fabricated the resurrection and then peddled their fables on ignorant people is silly. Thomas proves that even Jesus’ closest friends demanded proof before they believed.³¹

Eight Days Later...

In John 20:26, we come to the final reference to Jesus’ meeting with his people on the first day of the week: “Eight days later...” Although eight days after Sunday according to our counting methods would take us to Monday, ancient people counted days by an “inclusive” method that counted the first day as day one, so that “eight days later” means one week later—the next Sunday.³² Plus, the Old Testament contains many typological shadows to the “eighth day,” such as requiring the circumcision be performed on the eighth day of a newborn’s life (Gen. 17:12), or as an additional day to a week-long feast (e.g., Lev. 23:36, 39). Primarily, those shadows pointed to the reality that Jesus would be resurrected on the eighth day of the week (that is, the first day of the week after the week of his crucifixion).³³ John, however, seems to allude to the significance of the eighth day here too. Jesus could have chosen any length of time to wait before appearing to Thomas, and yet he chooses not to meet with his people again until the following first day of the week. As we mentioned in the previous chapter, the Christian pattern of gathering for Sabbath worship of Jesus on Sunday instead of on Saturday is not a man-made tradition, but an ordinance that Jesus himself establishes from the first day of his resurrection.

“My Lord and my God!”

Rather than rejecting Thomas for his lack of faith, Jesus graciously reveals himself to him the following week:

[26] Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although

the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” [27] Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” [28] Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” [29] Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:26–29)

As he said to the other disciples a week earlier, Jesus repeats his gospel word: “Peace be with you” (John 20:26). But then, Jesus turns directly to Thomas and tells Thomas to put his finger into his hands, and to place his hand in his side (John 20:27). Hendriksen observes that “For each demand of Thomas there is a command of Christ, though the order in which the commands are uttered is not exactly the same as that in which the demands were made.”³⁴ Although early tradition suggests that Thomas followed Jesus’ instructions, it is unlikely that Thomas touched Jesus before making his confession of faith in John 20:28.³⁵ John does not tell us that Thomas actually touched Jesus here. Furthermore, when Jesus remarks, “Have you believed because you have *seen* me?” he seems to be implying that it was the *sight*, not any *touch*, that brought about Thomas’s faith.³⁶

To be fair to Thomas, we should acknowledge that he too would have believed if he had been present for Jesus’ earlier appearance.³⁷ Also, we should recognize that Thomas now utters the strongest statement of faith in the entire Gospel of John when he exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28).³⁸ In regard to the minor rebuke Jesus makes to Thomas for needing to *see* Jesus before believing, Hendriksen notes, “There was nothing wrong with the words of the confession which Thomas uttered. There was something wrong with the manner in which he reached this level of faith.”³⁹ We need a faith that “does not rest satisfied with the immediate exercise of sight, but penetrates even to heaven, so as to believe those things which are hidden from the human senses.”⁴⁰ We cannot create this kind of faith for ourselves, of course, apart from the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit to cause us to be born again (John 3:3–8).

Along these lines, John Calvin offers a wonderful pastoral point for all those who long for the repentance of someone who is either wandering from Christ, or has never known him:

The same thing happens sometimes with many persons; for they grow wanton for a time, as if they had cast off all fear of God, so that there appears to be no longer any faith in them; but as soon as God has chastised them with a rod, the rebellion of their flesh is subdued, and they return to their right senses. It is certain that disease would not, of itself, be sufficient to teach piety; and hence we infer, that, when the obstructions have been removed, the good seed, which had been concealed and crushed, springs up.⁴¹

However long you have been praying for a lost soul, do not lose heart! Jesus Christ can reveal himself through his word and his Spirit in a moment to give faith to someone who does not walk by faith.

But how will Jesus do this? After his ascension, Jesus will no longer reveal himself by sight. Today, people must come to faith apart from having ever seen Jesus directly. If even Thomas would not believe apart from sight, then what hope do we have to see people come to faith today? By what means will Jesus reveal himself, if not by sight?

Jesus Saves Through His Word (John 20:30–31)

The answer John gives to these question is simple: Jesus will save, not through revealing himself by sight, but through revealing himself in his *word*. It is the proclamation of his gospel that leads sinners to faith:

[30] Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; [31] but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30–31)

John acknowledges that there are many other signs that he could have included in this book, but did not (John 20:30). Later, he will tell us that if he wrote down everything else that Jesus had done, “I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25). As we have observed throughout our study of this Gospel, John leaves out many things that we know about from the Synoptic Gospels, and now he tells us that he also leaves out many things that we do not know about from any of the four Gospels.

Nevertheless, John explains that a single, overarching purpose has guided his writing: “but these are written so that you may believe....” (John 20:31). By “these,” the context suggest that John refers to the “signs” that he has written down. Nevertheless, we should not think that, by speaking only of *signs*, John thereby excludes or diminishes the value of the *words* of Jesus that he has recorded for us. On the contrary, Jesus’ signs authenticate his words, and his words explain his signs.⁴² We cannot separate Jesus’ signs from his words, so John here includes *everything* he has written under his purpose statement: “so that you may believe.”

There is some debate about which audience John intends to reach by this purpose statement. Does he want to help unbelievers to come to faith in Jesus, or does he want to build up believers in the faith that they already have? In fact, different manuscripts preserve slightly different forms of the word “believe,” with one version suggesting that John wants to bring people to a one-time act of faith, and the other version suggesting that he wants to help people continue on in the faith.⁴³ Sometimes, scholars can see clearly which version is the original reading by identifying ways that variant spellings came into manuscripts, but this is a case where we cannot determine which version is original.⁴⁴ But even without knowing which specific word John originally wrote here (the words are only spelled differently by one letter), we should observe that John almost certainly does not want to exclude either kind of believing. That is, John wants this Gospel to bring people to faith for the first time (most likely the primary intention, if we were forced to guess), *and* he wants long-time believers to grow in their faith through studying Jesus in these pages. Rather than choosing one over the other, we must recognize that John means to include both purposes.⁴⁵

Specifically, John wants us to believe that Jesus is (1) the Christ, and (2) the Son of God. By believing that Jesus is “the Christ,” we come to recognize that Jesus is the Anointed One whom God sent into the world. He fulfills not only all the Old Testament anointed offices (prophet, priest, and king), but also all the Old Testament prophecies of how God would save his people from their sins and redeem even creation itself from the curse of sin and death that entered the world through Adam. By “Son of God,” John directs our attention back to the first words of the Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1), as well

as to all the various descriptions in this Gospel that Jesus is the Son sent from the Father. As the Son of God, Jesus is *equal* with God (John 5:18)—and, in fact, he *is* God (John 1:1). He is not merely the greatest of God’s human servants, but he is the eternal Son of the Father who entered this world by becoming flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:14).

Through faith in Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God, John promises that we will find *life* in his name. John earlier told us that “In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4). Because Jesus is God, he possesses life. Indeed, his Father granted the Son to have life in himself (John 5:26) and to give life to whomever he will (John 5:21)—a life that comes through looking upon the Son in faith (John 6:40). And, finally, John tells us that we may have life “in his name.” The “name” of Jesus refers to his character, his fame, and his glory—indeed, it stands for everything that is true about Jesus. R. C. H. Lenski captures this idea marvelously: “The entire Gospel of John, yea, the entire gospel as such, is nothing other than ‘His NAME.’”¹⁶

John has one last chapter to narrate a bit more of the life-giving *name* of Jesus to us, but this is the focal point and purpose statement of the whole Gospel of John. Believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, that by believing you may have life in his name!

Discussion Questions

1. If *we* are not allowed to see the resurrected Jesus, then why did Jesus choose to reveal himself to his first disciples? How important is their original testimony? Where do we find that testimony today? Do you need to re-evaluate the time, effort, attention, and devotion you give in studying that testimony?
2. What is the mission of the church? What kind of authority does Jesus give to the church to carry out that mission? In what ways do you think that mission extends beyond the borders of your local congregation of believers into the wider world? Into your neighborhood? Into your schools and workplaces? Into politics and government?
3. Why is the skepticism of Thomas so important for us today? How do his doubts help us when we doubt? In what ways is the method that Jesus revealed himself to Thomas similar to the method by which Jesus reveals himself to us? In what ways are those methods different? How do we encourage ourselves in the midst of doubts?
4. What is the gospel? What does the word of the gospel tell us about Jesus? Why does Jesus choose to reveal himself by his word? What implications does that have for the ministry that we seek to do? What role does the Holy Spirit play in bringing sinners to faith through the proclamation of the word?

Notes

1. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 457.
2. Köstenberger, *John*, 571.

3. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 263–64. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.x.iv.html>>

4. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1366.

5. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 379.

6. For the first and third arguments against this idea, see Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 458–59.

7. “For the analogy of the sign applies only if souls find their nourishment in Christ—which cannot happen unless Christ truly grow into one with us, and refreshes us by the eating of his flesh and the drinking of his blood.

Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ's flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space.” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1370; 4.17.10.)

8. “Let us, I say, permit the Christian man to open his mind and ears to every utterance of God directed to him, provided it be with such restraint that when the Lord closes his holy lips, he also shall at once close the way of inquiry.” (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 924; 3.21.3.)

9. “When the Romans crucified someone, they either tied or nailed the victim to the cross. If the latter, they drove the nails through the wrists; the hands would not have supported the weight. But both the Hebrew word for hand (*yāḏ*) and the Greek word (*cheir*) can include the wrist and the forearm. Nails were commonly driven through the feet, one spike through both feet, one foot placed on top of the other.” (Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 656.)

10. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 459.

11. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1367.

12. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 642.

13. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 379.

14. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1369.

15. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 460.

16. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 382.

17. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 649–55.

18. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1373.

19. “The relation of this gift to that made on the day of Pentecost is obscure. Some scholars maintain that the two are incompatible. They hold that Luke thought that the Spirit was not bestowed until ten days after the ascension, whereas John thought of this gift as taking place on the evening of the day of resurrection. But this may be going too far too fast. The circumstances of the two gifts are completely different. And, whereas that in Acts 2 is followed immediately by some very effective preaching, no sequel to this gift is narrated. It is the teaching of the New Testament that ‘There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit’ (1 Cor. 12:4), and the problem is probably to be solved along these lines. It is false alike to the New Testament and to Christian experience to maintain that there is but one gift of the Spirit. Rather the Spirit continually manifests himself in new ways. Subsequent to the gift at Pentecost the Spirit fell on all who heard the word in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:44), just as ‘on us at the beginning’ (Acts 11:15). On several occasions believers are said to have been ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ (e.g., Acts 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9; cf. Rom. 5:5; 1 Cor. 2:12, etc.), where the aorists indicate new activities of the Spirit, rather than a reference to what had always been the case. John tells of one gift of the Spirit and Luke or another.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 747–48.)

20. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 643.

21. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 270. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.x.iv.html>>
22. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 643–44.
23. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1375–76.
24. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 271. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.x.iv.html>>
25. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 461.
26. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 267. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.x.iv.html>>
27. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 284–90.
28. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1379.
29. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 752.
30. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1380.
31. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 751.
32. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 464.
33. Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 423–25.
34. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 465.
35. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 385.
36. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 753.
37. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 656.
38. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 648.
39. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 466.
40. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 278. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.x.v.html>>
41. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 276. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.x.v.html>>
42. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1394.
43. For a detailed discussion, see Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 661–63.
44. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 219–20.
45. “Above all, it can be shown that, with very high probability, the *hina*-clause must on syntactical grounds be rendered ‘that you may believe that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus’. That means that the fundamental question being addressed by the Evangelist is not ‘Who is Jesus?’, which might be asked by either Christians or non-Christians, if with slightly different emphases; but ‘Who is the Messiah?’ If that is understood as an identity question, as it must be, *Christians would not ask it because they already knew the answer*. Those who would ask it would be unconverted Jews, along with proselytes and God-fearers, for the category ‘Messiah’ was important to them, and the concern to identify him would be of great interest. This particular coalescence of Jews and Gentiles, of course, is entirely in line with the church’s evangelistic thrusts in the early decades of the church: e.g. ‘Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles...’ (Acts 13:26); ‘many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas’ (Acts 13:43)—even if it is also true that in many circumstances the animus this aroused forced Paul and his team, at least, to turn to Gentiles. But there is no reason to think that other pillars in the church, including John (Gal. 2:9), quickly turned to Gentiles unconnected with the synagogue.

Even if John’s purpose is primarily evangelistic, it must be admitted that throughout the history of the church this Gospel has served not only as a means for reaching unbelievers but as a means for instructing, edifying and comforting believers. Still, one must not confuse purpose with result. A modern evangelist aiming

at the conversion of hearers may still find that Christians who attend his ministry are greatly edified. John's *purpose* in writing was to evangelize; the impact of his Gospel, *i.e.* the result of his writing, has far exceeded any hope he could have entertained...." (Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 662–63.)

46. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1398.