

John's Gospel - Witnesses for the Defence

by John Vissers

Jesus defends himself against the charges of the religious leaders by calling witnesses, including John the Baptist and the miraculous signs, to testify to his identity and mission.

Duration: 39:26

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 5:31-32, John 5:34, John 5:39, John 5:46-47

Topics: "Gospel Of John"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses how Jesus provides evidence to support his claim of being the Messiah and having a special relationship with God the Father. The evidence presented includes the testimony of John the Baptist, Jesus' own work, the witness of Scripture, and ultimately the testimony of God the Father. The speaker emphasizes that those who accept the testimony of the Son of God will enter into life, while those who do not believe will be judged. The sermon also highlights how the gospel turns the tables on the religious leaders, who thought they were sitting in judgment but are now being judged themselves.

Transcript

Let's turn then to our lesson for the evening, and we're in John's Gospel chapter 5, and we're going to start reading tonight at verse 31. John chapter 5 at verse 31, which constitutes the last few paragraphs of the fifth chapter of John's Gospel. Let us hear the Word of God.

Jesus says, If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid. There is another who testifies in my favor, and I know that his testimony about me is valid. You have sent John, and he has testified to the truth.

Not that I accept human testimony, but I mention it that you may be saved. John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light. I have testimony weightier than that of John, for the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me.

And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice, nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life.

These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept praise from men, but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts.

I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me, but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe if you accept praise from another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God? But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set.

If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?" Let's pray together and seek God's guidance by his Spirit as we come to this passage tonight. Gracious and eternal and sovereign God, we thank you tonight for your Word.

We thank you especially that your Word points us to our Lord Jesus Christ. We pray tonight that by your Spirit you would illumine this Word and open it to our understanding that we might see, that we might know, that we might experience the reality of Christ in our lives. So we commit ourselves now to hearing your Word and pray that you would speak to each one through Christ our Lord.

Amen. Our passage tonight contains the second half of a very intense conversation between Jesus and the religious leaders in Jerusalem. In order to really understand what this conversation is about, we need to be reminded about how this chapter opened at the beginning of John chapter 5, because the conversation and the intensity of the conversation is really rooted in the events there.

Jesus healed a man by the pool at the Sheep's Gate in Jerusalem as he made his way into Jerusalem, and then he commanded that man, after he had been healed, to get up and to pick up his bed and to walk. And rather than this being an occasion of great joy, it became an occasion of great controversy, because the problem was Jesus had performed this miracle on the Sabbath, and he had clearly violated, in the eyes of the religious leaders, in the eyes of the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem, he had clearly violated the Sabbath principle, the Sabbath law, and he'd exacerbated the situation by commanding this man to pick up his bed and walk, and there was a specific regulation against carrying your bed on the Sabbath. So Jesus found himself in trouble before the religious leaders.

They had the evidence. They had the witnesses. They knew what had happened, and now they had confronted him with all that had gone on.

In response to those charges, and in response to what had happened, and we saw this last week in verses 16 to 30, Jesus begins to defend himself or begins to explain his actions. He says there's good reason for doing what he did. There's good reason for doing what he does.

He's not simply out to create problems. He's not simply out to create trouble, but rather he explains his actions in terms of his relationship to God the Father. He claims that his actions are divine actions, that he's only doing what God does, that his knowledge is a divine knowledge, that he's been given authority over life and death and over judgment itself, that he is worthy of the same honor and worship as the Father.

And as we saw last week, these are astonishing claims, and they only angered the religious leaders even more, because here Jesus was justifying what he had done, this clear violation of the Sabbath principle of the Sabbath law, breaking the Sabbath law. He's justifying it by claiming a unique identity, a unique

relationship with God the Father, that he is in the Father and the Father is in him, that there's a unity and an intimacy and an equality with God the Father. And so the religious leaders are incensed because he's claiming that he's nothing less, no one less than the Son of God, the Messianic Son of Man, the Messiah.

And this brings us then tonight to the second half of this conversation, or the second half really of this confrontation in verses 31 to 47, because now Jesus has to back up that claim somehow. Now Jesus has to provide evidence, as it were, to counter the evidence that has come forward from the religious leaders. How can he possibly prove his claim? What evidence can be entered to support what he has said, having laid out this opening argument, as it were, in verses 16 to 30? What testimony can now be brought forward to support the case that he's been making? I mean, how can he possibly prove before these religious leaders that he is in fact the Messiah, that he has this special relationship with God the Father? And so what comes forward in these closing paragraphs of the fifth chapter are the testimonies about Jesus.

This is the evidence which Jesus brings forward. These are the testimonies which are given. This is the witness which is made.

And in this section, Jesus points to a number of witnesses, a number of ways of looking at the evidence in support of his case before the religious leaders. Before we examine this testimony, though, before we look at the evidence that's brought forward, I want you to notice, and we've noticed this before, I want you to notice again how the trial motif, or the image of a trial, emerges again in John's Gospel. This is a motif which emerges and runs throughout John's Gospel.

It emerged already in John chapter 1, in the opening chapter, where John the Baptist is described as a witness to Jesus. And throughout the Gospel, it's as if a trial is being played out. Testimony is given.

Witnesses are called. Evidence is entered. The credibility of the testimony, the credibility of the evidence, the weight of the evidence is looked at.

And throughout the Gospel, we the readers are being asked by the minds to weigh this evidence, to look at the testimonies. Are we for Jesus, or are we against Jesus? And the trial motif culminates, of course, in the 18th chapter of John's Gospel, where Jesus finds himself before the religious leaders, and then before Herod, and before Pilate, in trial, and finally pronounced guilty and sentenced to death on a cross. And so here we have the trial motif again being played out.

Jesus calls witnesses for the defense. He acts, as it were, as his own defense lawyer. But he has witnesses.

There is testimony. There is evidence to be considered. Now notice in verse 31 that he begins by saying, if I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid.

It seems that Jesus is acknowledging here the principle that he really can't testify simply on his own behalf. He's acknowledging the principle that the unsupported evidence of one person, especially when it relates to yourself, cannot be taken as proof. Now this is an Old Testament principle.

You find it, for example, in Deuteronomy. In a number of places, Deuteronomy 17.6 or Deuteronomy 19 and verse 15. It's a principle which is picked up again in the New Testament.

The Apostle Paul uses it in 2nd Corinthians 13.1 and also in 1st Timothy 5.19. And Jesus, of course, himself draws attention to this principle in Matthew chapter 18 verse 16. So on this basis, Jesus is

prepared to call witnesses, to have evidence brought forward. But at the same time, he makes the astonishing claim in verse 32 that there is an other who testifies in my favor and I know that his testimony about me is valid.

Now what does he mean here? Well, he's referring to the reality that ultimately, while evidence can be brought forward, ultimately it's the testimony of God his Father that matters. The testimony of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father is the ultimate testimony that matters. And Jesus makes this point in John chapter 8. He really says, I have no need for evidence, for testimony, because in the end it's what my Father testifies concerning me and what I testify concerning my Father that ultimately matters.

In other words, nothing can ultimately prove the authenticity of these claims. There's no way that they can be ultimately proved, but nevertheless God has not left himself without a witness. So if the religious leaders want evidence, if they insist on having this testimony, Jesus can introduce the evidence that is required and he can call the witnesses that are necessary.

So let's look then at these witnesses, at this testimony which is brought forward. First of all, Jesus, which in what is not really a surprising move, appeals to the witness of John the Baptist in verses 34 and 35. You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth.

Remember in John chapter 1, they sent for John, the religious leaders went out and examined him. Not that I accept human testimony, but I mention it that you may be saved. John was a lamp that burned and gave light and you chose for a time to enjoy his light.

The first witness called forward to give evidence at this trial is John the Baptist. And Jesus reminds his accusers that they knew about the life of John the Baptist, about the ministry of John the Baptist, and that they were in fact enamored with John the Baptist for a time. Jesus says, I don't really need a human testimony, but if you really want one, John the Baptist is probably the best human testimony that I can bring forward.

In John 1 verses 19 to 21, the religious leaders had interrogated John the Baptist. In John 3, the testimony of John the Baptist about Jesus is described in great detail and we've looked at both of those passages. And Jesus reminds the religious leaders that they looked at John the Baptist and they saw him as an authentic prophet.

They saw him as an authentic voice that needed to be heeded until he began to speak about Jesus as the Lamb of God. He says John the Baptist was not the light coming into the world, but he was a witness to that light. While they were enamored at first with John the Baptist, finally then they turned away from John the Baptist and they left him to his fate at the hands of Herod.

And what Jesus is saying is that by turning away from John the Baptist, they were really excluding themselves from the possibility of recognizing the witness of John the Baptist to Jesus. That he is the true light. They had missed this human testimony to the identity and to the mission of Jesus.

Here John the Baptist had been provided as a human witness, as a human testimony to Jesus, but his witness, his testimony had been set aside. And Jesus says you need to look again at the witness of John the Baptist. It seems to me that there is a principle here that is exceedingly important in terms of our own understanding of the Christian faith today.

Many people miss the evidence around them concerning the human testimony to the identity and the mission of Jesus in our day. It may be through preaching and teaching. It may be through the personal testimony of others.

There are many believing men and women who can point to the reality of Jesus Christ in their lives. That is, they can speak about an authentic reality, about something which has happened in their lives. They can speak about the reality of Jesus Christ.

They can point to Christ in the same way as John the Baptist pointed to Christ. They can speak about what their life was like before Christ was a part of it. And they can speak now about what their life is like now that Christ has become a reality for them.

The testimony, such a witness, doesn't make it true. But it is a witness. And sometimes it can be a very powerful witness to the reality of Jesus.

Perhaps you can think of someone in your own life, in your own experience, in your own circle of friends or acquaintances, someone who has had a profound life-changing experience with Jesus Christ. And you know that it's authentic, and you know that it's real. And you look at that, and that becomes for you a testimony, a sign that the reality of Jesus is indeed a reality, that the gospel is authentic.

The witness doesn't make it true, but it points to the truth, to the reality of Jesus Christ. One of my former congregations, and this is a number of years ago now, sponsored some Vietnamese families at a time when there was a great need to provide refuge for those fleeing from Vietnam following the war. You'll remember in the aftermath of the war in the late 70s, and the refugee crisis that was faced at that time.

During that time, one of my elders, one of the elders in my congregation, was also in charge of the Visitation Evangelism program of that congregation, overseeing a program of Visitation Evangelism for new people who had moved into the area. And one of the refugee families that had been sponsored by the church lived very close to the church. They lived close by, and so they received a visit from my elder and from his team.

The church had sponsored the family. They had provided them with a place to live. They'd helped them find jobs.

They'd welcomed them into the community. And during the visit, the elder began to speak to them at what he thought was an appropriate moment about the reality of Jesus Christ, which motivated our people about the love of God for them. But the more he talked, somehow, the more confusing the conversation became.

There was a lack of communication. Part of it was a language problem, and the conversation didn't seem to be going anywhere, until at a critical moment in the conversation, the husband and the father in that family simply blurted out, tell me, is your God like the people at your church? For if he is, we want to know him. You see, at that point, the testimony of what those people had experienced became a reality.

Through the word and deed of the ministry of that congregation, these folks had been shown the living Christ in action. Now, it works both ways, of course. It works both ways, because oftentimes those of us who name the name of Christ do not bear his name in a way that honors him.

But is it not the case that there is a human testimony to the reality of Christ? Someone has put it this way, you are writing a gospel, a chapter each day, by deeds that you do, by words that you say. People read what you write, whether faithless or true. So what is the gospel according to you? You see, the reality is that for many people, the only Bible that they're going to read is you.

The only witness that they're ever going to hear or see is you. You may be the evidence that is going to require of them a verdict concerning Jesus Christ. You may be the one, whether you know it or not, who is called upon to point someone to Jesus Christ.

And you don't have to be eloquent, you don't have to be elegant, you don't have to have all and have your life all together at every point, but you may be called upon to be a witness for Jesus Christ. The question that I want to leave you with in terms of this point is, would Jesus call you to the stand as a witness for his defense, as he called John the Baptist? Then secondly, Jesus cites the evidence of his own work and his own life in verses 36 to 38. Jesus asks, Jesus invites the religious leaders to reevaluate his ministry.

He doesn't hide anything from them. He says to them, look at my life, look at what I've done, evaluate what I've done. For those with eyes to see, these works are signs that the reign of God is present.

Now Jesus has been doing many miraculous signs. He's been preaching, he's been teaching, he's been healing, we've seen some of those signs. He's doing the work that the Father has sent him to do.

And what Jesus is saying is, if you look at my life, if you look at my ministry, if you look at what I'm doing, you will begin to see that what I've just said is true, that I can't be doing this just of myself, but that God the Father must be at work in my life. Do you remember back in John chapter 3, when we looked at Nicodemus and how Nicodemus came to Jesus at night? What was it that attracted Nicodemus to Jesus? He knew that no one could perform the miraculous signs that Jesus was doing if God were not with him. In other words, Nicodemus recognized something that the other religious leaders, and Nicodemus was a Pharisee, he too was a religious leader, but he recognized something that the others seemed not to be able to recognize, that God was at work here, that it may not be according to Hoyle at every point, that it didn't somehow fit everything that they had preconceived in their own minds, but nevertheless God himself was at work in the life and the ministry of Jesus.

Now Jesus is very careful, and John the Gospel writer is very careful always to point out that the miracles themselves do not in fact prove the reality. The miracles don't prove that Jesus is the Son of God, because if they did, then people would put their faith in the miracles themselves, and that's the very thing that Jesus doesn't want. But they act as signs, and that's why there's this wonderful word in John's Gospel, the miraculous signs.

They are witnesses, they are signposts, they point to the reality of God at work, and they point to the reality that the Father has accredited the work of the Son, that God himself has borne witness to the work of Jesus. And we see this in a marvelous way throughout the Gospels time and time again. Do you remember right at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus, Jesus is baptized, the Spirit descends on him like a dove, and there's a voice from heaven, and what does the voice say? This is my beloved Son, with him I am well pleased.

Or you think about the Mount of Transfiguration, where Jesus is glorified before some of the disciples, and again there's a voice from heaven, this is my Son with whom I am well pleased, listen to him. God the Father accredits the ministry of Jesus, and the final, the culminating point of that accreditation, the final

verdict of the Father is the resurrection of Jesus itself. Because in the resurrection, God the Father says, this is my beloved Son, with him I am well pleased, listen to him as I raise him from the dead, he conquers death itself.

And so Jesus here is pointing to this intimate, integral relationship between he and the Father, and the Father at work in his life. Today is the day of salvation, the kingdom of God is at hand, Jesus says, because the Father is at work in my life. There's a wonderful story, I have no idea whether it's true or not, a wonderful story about the 19th century painter Paul Doré.

The story goes that he was traveling by train outside of his own country somewhere else in Europe, and he lost his passport while he was traveling, that's a nightmare for any traveler, those of you have ever lost a passport will know what kind of an experience that can be, and when he arrived at the border, he was confronted by a very suspicious immigration official. I'm sorry, he said to the immigration official, I've lost my identification documents, but I can tell you that I'm Paul Doré, the painter. The skeptical guard, of course, responded, sure you are, and pigs may fly, and on and on he went with his skepticism.

So the painter Paul Doré was wondering what he could do to try to prove that in fact he was who he said he was. Finally, finally the immigration official was willing to have some evidence presented to him, and so Doré took up a pen and took up some paper and a pencil, and he made a lightning sketch of some nearby travelers with such inimitable skill that the official was impressed, and he realized that if this person wasn't Paul Doré, at least he was a pretty good artist, and he led him through, because in fact he'd had some evidence that his identity had been confirmed. Well, in a very real sense, you see, the miracles of Jesus, the teachings of Jesus, all that Jesus says and does is that kind of evidence, his actions, his teachings, his miracles.

They are powerful testimonies to who he is. They don't prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt. It's not a scientific kind of proof, but it's evidence which is entered, evidence that demands attention, evidence that cannot be easily dismissed.

And what Jesus asks of the religious leaders is the same thing that he asks of us, that we take this evidence as seriously, the evidence of his life, the evidence of his words, the evidence of his ministry, of his actions, at least as seriously as we take our own lives. That's the beginning point of faith. Jesus doesn't ask us to start by believing everything if we have difficulty in believing and accepting it, but he asks us to believe his word with as much seriousness as we take our own words.

And that is then the first step of faith. You don't have to begin with an abundance of faith, but you do have to begin at least with a willingness to consider the evidence of the life and ministry of Jesus and not allow your preconceived notions, the preconceived notions of our world, who have put Jesus in a particular box, allow that to marginalize your thinking concerning his identity. And then finally, notice that Jesus points to the witness of the Scriptures in verses 39 and 40.

These are powerful words. You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

There's a very important principle here which is being developed, a very important principle in the New Testament, really a very important principle that we find throughout Scripture, and it's the basic principle that the Scriptures do not point to themselves. The Scriptures point to another. They point to Jesus Christ.

And Jesus says to the religious leaders, that's why you've missed my teaching. That's why you've missed my identity. That's why you haven't understood who I am.

Jesus says that they're looking, they're failing to see in the Scriptures the reality that they point to Christ. And later in verse 46, he tells them that they really don't believe in the words of Moses, which would have been a shocking accusation, a shocking insult to the religious leaders, because if they really believed in the words of Moses, they would understand that Moses was speaking about Jesus. Now it's important here to realize that Jesus concedes that these are people who are students of Scripture.

They study the Scriptures diligently. They think that by doing so they will possess eternal life, but what Jesus is saying is they miss the forest for the trees. They are so caught up with the details, with the laws, with the minutiae, with these Sabbath laws and regulations, with all the human tradition that's been added on to them, that they've missed the big picture.

And they don't read the Bible in the way that it ought to be read through a right relationship with God, whose voice the Bible is. We need to understand that the Bible is indeed God's voice to us, but the purpose of that voice is to speak to us in the same way that John the Baptist spoke about Jesus, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In one of his books, Donald Gray Barnhouse, who was for many years the pastor of 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, describes the Bible in this way.

He says, the Bible is like a window, and I quote him, the purpose of the Bible is that you may look through it and see Jesus Christ. The Bible is not a thing to be analyzed and criticized and outlined and examined for its own sake. That would be like sitting in a room and writing a book about a window without seeing the ocean with its waves curling up the beach or the way the lights and clouds play upon the water.

The Bible is not an end in itself any more than a window is an end in itself. The window allows us to see the beauty which lies beyond, and the Bible is the way to life in Jesus Christ. The Bible contains the words of life because it points us to the Word of Life, Jesus Christ.

The British preacher Roy Clements puts it this way beautifully, the Bible is God's testimony to his Son. Its purpose is to direct us on divine authority to Jesus as the source of life. The Bible is a signpost.

It cannot give life itself. It can only point to the one in whom life can be found. It's a prescription.

It cannot cure sin, but it can specify the medicine that will, and it is vital that those of us who call ourselves evangelicals understand this. The Bible is never an end in itself, and if we are found treating it as such, we fall into the trap of which some validly accuse us, bibliolatry, worshipping a divine book rather than its divine author. Yes, the Bible is inspired.

Yes, we believe the Bible is the infallible rule of faith and practice. Yes, we believe the Bible is trustworthy, that it is the Word of Life, but as Calvin reminds us, what the Bible ultimately about is Jesus Christ, and in the words of the Bible, Christ comes clothed to us in the words of his gospel so that when we pick up this book, it's not a book, an ancient book, simply to be read and dissected, but here we have the words of Christ himself and the reality of Christ made real for us. It is a witness to Jesus Christ.

And so here is the testimony. Here is the evidence that demands a verdict. The testimony of John the Baptist, the testimony of Jesus' own work, the witness of Scripture, and underneath and through it all, ultimately is the testimony and the witness of God the Father accrediting the work and the ministry and the

identity of the Son.

And Jesus concludes his defense by saying that those who accept the testimony of the Son of God will enter into life, but those who don't believe this word will be judged. Now notice what's going on here, because again, as we've seen before, in a surprising move, Jesus has now turned the tables on the religious leaders. The defendant, Jesus, who was called upon to bring forth evidence and testimony to support his case, has now become the presiding judge, and the religious leaders who thought they were sitting on the seat of judgment are now themselves being judged.

And that, my friends, is what the gospel does. It turns everything on its head. You see, we may think that Jesus somehow stands under our judgment.

We may think that somehow Jesus has to prove himself to us, that he has to conform to our ways of thinking. But when Jesus confronts us, when he presents his evidence, we begin to see that it is the other way around. It's not the identity of Jesus which is at issue, but rather it is our identity which is in question.

And it's our identity which suddenly we have to start thinking about, and it's who we are in relation to who Jesus is that is the issue before us. This past week, in one of the few moments, one of the few times I turned on the television, I happened upon an interview with Douglas Copeland. Douglas Copeland, as many of you will know, is a well-known, now a well-known, younger Canadian author.

He's from British Columbia. He's published a couple of books, most notably Generation X and his book Life After God, and now he's on the circuit flogging his new book, which is called Girlfriend in a Coma. Very interesting title for a book.

When asked to describe in this interview what he meant by Generation X, that is, what he would describe the characteristic features of Generation X, he responded in a kind of interesting way, because he told the interviewer that the question itself betrayed a misunderstanding of what the term meant. Because he said the point of Generation X was that he couldn't really describe it, that it really had no common characteristic features, the generation that follows the baby boomer generation. The point of X is that it has no common identity.

X is an unknown quantity. And he said, what I was trying to say is that this generation is struggling to find its identity and can fill in to that X whatever it wants, whatever it thinks or whatever it feels will make sense, will make them feel right and help us to find our identity. So Generation X, for him, is truly an X, truly an unknown identity, until a person somehow figures out and fills in that X with some sort of an identity.

I found that interesting because, quite frankly, with all the talk about Generation X, I kind of missed that point myself. And in reality, if what Copeland is saying is true, that we are in the midst of a generation searching for an identity, a generation with an X in the middle of its identity, then the gospel has a powerful word for that generation. Because what Jesus is saying here, and what the gospel provides for us, is in fact a reality to put into that X, none other than Jesus Christ himself.

Because what Jesus is offering us is an identity in him, to allow him to give us life, to give us life which is abundant, which is full, and in which we find our purpose and our direction and our meaning, so that in fact our lives will become the kind of evidence, the kind of testimony, the kind of witness that Jesus calls forward in this passage. Let us pray. Lord, we thank you that though most of the time we are confused about who we are, you are not confused about who you are.

Help us to understand in a new way tonight who you are, and help us to understand in a new way because we know who you are, who we also are in you. Through Christ we pray. Amen.

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