

The Gospel of John (35); The Third Discourse of Jesus (5)

Introduction:

This third discourse of Jesus recorded in John's Gospel is rather lengthy. This is the fifth Lord's Day in which we have given our focus upon it. However on two Sundays we were diverted somewhat because of our need to address matters of eschatology, that is, the biblical teaching regarding the end times. And then last Sunday we gave attention to our Lord's birth due to Christmas. But today we resume our progress through this discourse of our Lord. Let us read **verses 31 through 40** in which our Lord sets forth four witnesses that bear testimony of His true identity and work. Jesus declared,

³¹"If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true. ³²There is another who bears witness of Me, and I know that the witness which He witnesses of Me is true. ³³You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. ³⁴Yet I do not receive testimony from man, but I say these things that you may be saved. ³⁵He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light. ³⁶But I have a greater witness than John's; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish—the very works that I do—bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me. ³⁷And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. ³⁸But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. ³⁹You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. ⁴⁰But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.

It is important for us to recall the context in which our Lord spoke these words. He was speaking to Jewish leaders who not only did not believe Him for who He was, the very Son of God, but they were resolved to have Him killed. In their thinking He had committed two transgressions worthy of death. First, when He had healed a man, they accused Him of having broken the Sabbath Day. This was a false charge, for Jesus had not broken God's law; rather, He had transgressed their wrong view of the Mosaic Law regarding the Sabbath, which is no breaking of God's law. And secondly, they believed (wrongly) that Jesus committed blasphemy against God in making Himself equal with God. We read about this in John 5:18, "Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God."

In the passage before us, Jesus defends His identity as the Son of God, who is equal with God, by calling forth four witnesses to His claim. As we consider these witnesses, we should recognize the irrefutable evidence that God the Father has given through them to substantiate the claims of Jesus to be the Son of God. And yet, in spite of this overwhelming evidence, it is not sufficient to bring sinners to faith in Him. People who hear these testimonies of Jesus set before us today, will respond in unbelief just that these Jewish leaders exhibited, unless the Lord does an inward work of grace in their souls to bring them to repentance and faith and thereby be saved from their sin.

First, let us consider

I. Jesus' witness of Himself and His Father's witness of Him. (5:31-32)

The Jewish leaders rejected the claims of Jesus as to His identity as the Son of God. But the Lord declared that there was ample testimony to validate His claim. He acknowledged in **verse 31** that His own witness to His own identity was not sufficient—"***If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true.***" Of course He was not confessing that His own witness was false, but that it was insufficient alone to substantiate His deity before others. As one wrote,

But Jesus is not declaring that his witness is untrue or false, nor is he claiming that it is invalid. Rather, he is declaring with verse 30 and in the context of the rest of the pericope that even if it is true and valid it is still not “sufficient” on its own.¹

Perhaps the Lord was alluding to the principle of the Old Testament Scriptures, which states:

“A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.” (Deut. 19:15)

F. F. Bruce stated the matter this way:

“A testimonial to oneself is no testimonial. No one can witness his own signature. If Jesus’ claims were made without the Father’s authority, there would be no obligation on his hearers to accept them.”²

That universally mankind does not accept the testimony of a man toward himself reveals the sinfulness and selfishness of mankind.

“It reflects reproach on the sons of men, and their veracity and integrity. Surely we may say deliberately, what David said in haste, *All men are liars*, else it would never been such a received maxim that a man’s testimony of himself is suspicious, and not to be relied on; it is a sign that self-love is stronger than love for the truth.” (Matthew Henry)

But in addition, this reflects on our Lord’s gracious condescension to us in that although he was a faithful witness—He is truth itself—, nevertheless, He chose not to call upon His own witness, because it might have been received with suspicion, for they would have viewed him, too, as but a man whose witness of himself was not a trustworthy source in their opinion.

However, Jesus might have been declaring that His own witness is insufficient, because He does not bear witness Himself. He does not act independent of His Father, but rather all that He thinks and does was the Father working through Him. This would follow with **verse 32**, which again reads, “*There is another who bears witness of Me, and I know that the witness which He witnesses of Me is true.*” In other words, it may be that Jesus was simply saying that He did not give an independent witness for Himself, because He never acted on His own. For everything Jesus said and did was actually His Father working or bearing witness through Him.

Before we move on, we might compare verse 31, in which our Lord said, “*If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true*” with our Lord’s statement in John 8:14, which reads, “*Even if I bear witness of Myself, My witness is true...*” This appears to be a direct contradiction. How are both things true? Interestingly, these two verses appear so contradictory that pastor and theologian, **Andrew Fuller** (1754-1815), addressed them in his sermon entitled, “Passages Apparently Contradictory”:

Our Lord, in one of these passages, expresses what was to be admitted as truth *in the account of men*; in the other, what His testimony was *in itself*. Admitting their laws or rules of evidence, His testimony would not have been credible; and therefore, in the verses following, He appeals to that of John the Baptist, and the works which He had wrought in His Father’s name, which amounted to a testimony from the Father. But though He in a manner gave up His own testimony, yielding Himself to be tried even by their forms of evidence, yet would He not so far concede as to dishonour His character. He was in fact, whatever they might judge of Him, the Amen, the faithful and the true Witness; and, as

¹ Edward W. Klink, III, **John**. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), pp. 291.

² F. F. Bruce, **The Gospel of John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 134.

such, He taught many things, prefacing what He delivered with that peculiar and expressive phrase—“Verily, verily, I say unto you!”³

In other words, in John 5:31 Jesus declared that His testimony was not valid to others, but in John 8:14 Jesus declared that His own witness of His identity was true.

But, again, Jesus said that apart from His own witness, the Father gave testimony to His Son through other witnesses. He declared in verse 32 that God (the Father) bears witness of Him; and most certainly His witness is valid. He then stated four witnesses that testified to His true identity as the Son of God. These include (1) the witness of John the Baptist (vs. 33-35), (2) the witness of the works of Jesus (v. 36), (3) the witness of the Father Himself (vs. 37-38), and (4) the witness of the Holy Scriptures. God the Father has set forth these four witnesses to testify and validate that Jesus is the Son of God. Let us consider these four witnesses to Jesus’ identity.

II. The four witnesses to the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. (5:33-40)

A. The witness of John the Baptist (vs. 33-35)

Jesus declared to His detractors:

³³You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. ³⁴Yet I do not receive testimony from man, but I say these things that you may be saved. ³⁵He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light.

1. “You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth.” (5:33)

Here Jesus said that these Jewish leaders, who were so bent on killing Him, “have sent to John.” When we first read of John the Baptist in John 1, we read that he was a witness that God had sent to testify of Jesus. We read in John 1:6-8,

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. ⁸He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.

Later in the chapter, John 1:19ff, we read of the Jewish leaders coming from Jerusalem to see John and we read of his witness to them. He was faithful in declaring to them that he was only there as a witness to Jesus Christ. John the Baptist had “borne witness to the truth” of Jesus’ true identity as the Son of God. Notice, by the way, Jesus did not say directly that John bore witness “to Him”, but rather, John bore witness “to the truth”, which is in actuality the same thing.

But we then read our Lord’s words,

2. “Yet I do not receive testimony from man, but I say these things that you may be saved.” (5:34)

What Jesus was declaring is that though John had testified truthfully of the deity of Jesus as the true Light from God, Jesus did not depend on John’s witness for His own self-identity. “Jesus Himself did not, could not, *accept human testimony* – i.e., He Himself did not depend on it to establish who He was in His own mind.”⁴ Jesus spoke of the witness of John the Baptist for the purpose of those present “may be saved.” People are saved through putting their faith in Jesus Christ. But one aspect of this faith is believing Jesus for

³ Fuller, Andrew. **The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller: Memoirs, Sermons, Etc., vol. 1** (Sprinkle Publications, 1988), pp 667–684.

⁴ Donald A. Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 260.

who He is in truth. Since John the Baptist had testified of this truth, it could lead to them coming to faith in Jesus Christ for their salvation.

People are saved by believing in Jesus; John the Baptist's witness may help them believe: that was its purpose (*cf.* 1:7), and hence Jesus' appeal to such witness is justified.⁵

We next read of Jesus' assessment of John the Baptist's witness.

**3. "He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light."
(5:35)**

This verse describes John the Baptist. For a time he was quite popular and respected. Even the Jewish leaders for a while seemed to acknowledge him as a prophet. But take note, their interest and enthusiasm was only temporary. As **Matthew Henry** (1662-1714) wrote:

Note, many that seem to be affected and pleased with the gospel at first, afterwards despise and reject it; it is common for forward and noisy professors (i.e. profess to believe) to cool off and fall off. These here rejoiced in John's light, but never walked in it, and therefore did not keep to it; they were like stony ground.

In preparation for this morning's message I came across a sermon delivered by **Jonathan Edwards** (1703-1758) at an ordination of a young man in Pelham, Massachusetts. Pelham is a community just west of Quabbin Reservoir. It is situated about 40 miles west of us. Based on what the Scriptures say of John the Baptist here in John 5:35, Edwards spoke about pastors as preachers of the Gospel. He organized his sermon in the following manner:

I would, by divine assistance, handle the subject in the following method:

- I. I would show that Christ's design in the appointment of the order and office of ministers of the gospel is that they may be lights to the souls of men.
- II. I would show what is implied in their being burning lights.
- III. I would show what is implied in their being shining lights.
- IV. I would show that it is the proper excellency of ministers of the gospel to have these things united in them, to be both burning and shining lights.
- V. I would apply these things to all that Christ has called to the work of the gospel ministry, showing how much it concerns them earnestly to endeavor that they may be burning and shining lights.
- VI. Show what ministers of the gospel ought to do that they may be so.
- VII. Say something briefly concerning the duty of a people that are under the care of a gospel minister, correspondent to those things that Christ has taught us concerning the end and excellency of a gospel minister.

Edwards said that a pastor should be as John the Baptist was, a man who is "a burning and shining light." I would like us to consider the application of these words more broadly, that they would be true of our church. I pray that they would be true of me, but I pray also that they would be true of our church.

⁵ Ibid.

“The use of a light is threefold; to discover, to refresh, and to direct. *The first use of a light is to discover things*, or make them manifest. Without light nothing is to be seen. Ephesians 5:13, “Whatsoever doth make manifest is light.” Ministers are set to be lights to the souls of men in this respect, as they are to be the means of imparting divine truth to them, and bringing into their view the most glorious and excellent objects, and of leading them to and assisting them in the contemplation of those things that angels desire to look into. The means of their obtaining that knowledge is infinitely more important, and more excellent and useful, than that of the greatest statesmen or philosophers, even that which is spiritual and divine. They are set to be the means of bringing men out of darkness into God’s marvelous light, and of bringing them to the infinite fountain of light, that in his light they may see light: they are set to instruct men, and impart to them that knowledge by which they may know God and Jesus Christ, whom to know is life eternal.

Another use of light is to refresh and delight the beholders. Darkness is dismal. The light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is to behold the sun. Light is refreshing to those who have long sat in darkness. They therefore that watch and keep awake through a dark night, long and wait for the light of the morning; and the wise man observes, Proverbs 15:30, “That the light of the eyes rejoiceth the heart.” Spiritual light is especially refreshing and joyful, Psalm 97:11, “Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart.” They that see the light of Christ, the star that hath arisen out of Jacob, are refreshed and do rejoice, and the wise men that saw the star that showed them where Christ was, Matthew 2:10, “And when they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.”

Ministers are set in the church of God to be the instruments of this comfort and refreshment to the souls of men, to be the instruments of leading souls to the God of all consolation, and fountain of their happiness. They are sent as Christ was, and as coworkers with Him, to preach good tidings to the meek, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound, and to comfort all that mourn. They are to lead those that “labor and are heavy laden” to their true rest, and to speak a word in season to him that is weary. They are set to be ministers of the consolation and joy of the saints, 2 Corinthians 1:24, “We have not dominion over your faith; but are helpers of your joy.”

The third use of light is to direct. ’Tis by light that we see where to go. “He that walks in darkness knows not whither he goes,” and is in danger of stumbling and falling into mischief. Tis by light that men see what to do, and are enabled to work. In the night, Christ tells us, no man can work. Ministers are set to be lights to men’s souls in this respect also. As Zacharias observes of John the Baptist, Luke 1:79, “To guide our feet in the way of peace.” Ministers have the record of God committed to them that they may hold that forth, which God has given to be to man as a light shining in a dark place, to guide them in the way through this dark world, to regions of eternal light.

Edwards then proceeded to explain more fully what should characterize the light of a true minister. Again, John 5:35 declares of John the Baptist, “He was the *burning* and *shining* lamp (light).” By “burning”, Edwards spoke of the fervor of the heart of the man of God. There are these two things that seem naturally to be understood by this expression, *a burning light*.

First, that his heart be full of much of the holy ardor of a spirit of true piety. We read of the power of godliness. True grace is no dull, inactive, ineffectual principle. It is a powerful thing. There is an exceeding energy in it. And the reason is, that God is in it; it is a divine principle, a participation of the divine nature, and a communication of divine life, of the life of a risen Savior, who exerts himself in the hearts of the saints, after the power of an endless life. They that have true grace in them, *they live*; but not by their own life; *but Christ lives in them*. His Holy Spirit becomes in them a living principle and spring of divine life; the energy and power of which is in Scripture compared to fire. Matthew 3:11, “I indeed baptize you with water; but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear; he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.” True piety is not a thing remaining only in the head, or consisting in any speculative knowledge or opinions, or outward morality,

or forms of religion. It reaches the heart, is chiefly seated there, and burns there. There is a holy ardor in everything that belongs to true grace...

Second, the inward holy ardor of his soul is exercised and manifested in his being *zealous and fervent in his administrations*. For he is a *burning light*. [This] implies that his spiritual heat and holy ardor is not for himself only, but is communicative and for the benefit of others. He is ardent, as he is a *light*, or in the performance of the duties of that office wherein he is set to be a light in the church of Christ. His fervent zeal, which has its foundation and spring in that holy and powerful flame of love to God and man, that is in his heart, appears in the fervency of his prayers to God, for and with his people. And in the earnestness and power with which he preaches the Word of God, declares to sinners their misery, and warns them to fly from the wrath to come, and reproveth and testifies against all ungodliness; and the unfeigned earnestness and compassion with which he invites the weary and heavy laden to their Savior; and the fervent love with which he counsels and comforts the saints; and the holy zeal, courage, and steadfastness, with which he maintains the exercise of discipline in the house of God, notwithstanding all the opposition he meets with in that difficult part of the ministerial work; and in the diligence and earnestness with which he attends every duty of his ministerial function, whether public or private.

But then Edwards set forth that the man of God was not only a “burning” light, but he was to be as John the Baptist, *a shining light*. What does this speak about?

First, that he be *pure, clear, and full in his doctrine*. A minister is set to be a light to men’s souls, by teaching, or doctrine. And if he be a shining light in this respect, the light of his doctrine must be bright and full. It must be pure without mixtures of darkness. And therefore he must be sound in the faith, not one that is of a reprobate mind. In doctrine he must show uncorruptness; otherwise his *light* will be darkness. He must not lead his people into errors, but teach them the truth only, guiding their feet into the way of peace, and leading them in the right ways of the Lord.

He must be one that is *able to teach*; not one that is raw, ignorant, or unlearned, and but little versed in the things that he is to teach others; *not a novice*, or one that is *unskillful in the word of righteousness*. He must be one that is well studied in divinity, well acquainted with the written Word of God, mighty in the Scriptures, and able to instruct and convince gainsayers.

And in order to be a *shining light*, he must be one that really knows what religion is; one that is truly acquainted with that Savior and way of salvation, that he is to teach to others, that he may *speak the things that he knows, and testify the things that he has seen*, and not be a blind leader of the blind. He must be one that is acquainted with experimental religion, and not ignorant of the inward operations of the Spirit of God, nor of Satan’s devices; able to guide souls under their particular difficulties. Thus he must be *a scribe well instructed in things that pertain to the kingdom of God; one that brings forth out of his treasures things new and old*.

And in order to his being a *shining light*, his doctrine must be *full*. He must not only be able to teach, but apt to teach, ready to instruct the ignorant, and them that are out of the way, and diligent in teaching in public and private; and careful and faithful to declare the whole counsel of God, and not keep back anything that may be profitable to his hearers.

Also his being a *shining light* implies that his instructions are clear and plain, accommodated to the capacity of his hearers, and tending to convey light to their understandings.

Second, another thing requisite in order to a minister’s being a *shining light*, is that he be *discreet in all his administrations*. The fervent zeal that thus should animate and actuate him in his administrations should be regulated by discretion. He should not only be knowing, and able to communicate knowledge and formed to do it; but also wise, and know how to conduct himself in the house of God, as a wise builder, and a wise steward. And as he is one that God hath sent forth to labor in his field, and committed the care of his vineyard to, so he should conduct himself there as one *whom his God doth instruct to discretion*. He should not only be as *harmless as a dove*, but as *wise as a serpent*; showing himself a *workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth*; and one that *knows how to govern the church of God, and to walk in wisdom towards those that are without*.

Third, another thing implied in a minister's being a *shining light* is that he *shines in his conversation* (Edwards meant by this the manner in which the pastor lived.). If he shines never so much in his doctrine and administrations in the house of God, yet if there be not an answerable brightness in his conversation, it will have a tendency to render all ineffectual. Christ, in Mathew 5:14, 15, 16, says to His disciples (having undoubtedly a special respect to those of them that were to be sent forth to preach the gospel), "Ye are the light of the world: Men do not light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick, and it giveth light unto all that are in the house." And how does Christ direct them to give light to others? "Let your light," says he, "so shine before men, that others, seeing your *good works*, may glorify your Father which is in heaven."

We have considered this lengthy treatment of John the Baptist to show forth not merely what I would desire to be true of myself, but that these things would be true and continue to be true of our church. May our church be characterized as a "burning and shining light", testifying of Jesus Christ in our community, our New England region, and through our influence in many places in the world. Let us work toward this end and certainly pray toward this end that the Lord would enable our church to glorify Him through the proclamation of the Gospel to the conversion of many souls, bringing them into the Kingdom of God.

Before we move on to the next witness of Jesus, let us consider our Lord's own witness to John the Baptist. John may have been killed by King Herod by this time. Perhaps many had forgotten him, but our Lord had not done so. John honored Jesus, and Jesus honored John for having honored Him. Here are the words of **J. C. Ryle** (1816-1900) on this matter:

Let us observe, for one thing, in this passage, *the honour Christ puts on His faithful servants*. See how He speaks of John the Baptist.—"He bare witness to the truth;"—"He was a burning and shining light."—John had probably passed away from his earthly labours when these words were spoken. He had been persecuted, imprisoned, and put to death by Herod,—none interfering none trying to prevent his murder. But this murdered disciple was not forgotten buy His Divine Master. If no one else remembered him, Jesus did. He had honoured Christ, and Christ honoured him.

These things ought not to be overlooked. They are written to teach us that Christ cares for all His believing people, and never forgets them. Forgotten and despised by the world, perhaps, they are never forgotten by their Saviour. He knows where they dwell, and what their trials are. A book of remembrance is written for them. "Their tears are all in His bottle" (Psalm 56:8). Their names are graven on the palms of His hands. He notices all they do for Him in this evil world, though they think it not worth notice, and He will confess it one day publicly, before His Father and the holy angels. He that bore witness to John the Baptist never changes. Let believers remember this. In their worst estate they may boldly say with David, "I am poor and needy; yet the Lord thinketh upon me" (Psa. 10:17).⁶

In addition to the first witness of John the Baptist who testified of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus, our account sets forth a second witness.

B. The witness of the works of Jesus (v. 36)

The works that Jesus performed were the Father's witness that Jesus was His Son. The works that Jesus performed were actually the Father bearing witness of Him. We read in **verse 36**,

"But I have a greater witness than John's; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish—the very works that I do—bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me."

Jesus was declaring that although John's testimony was true of Him, His works were a greater witness to His identity as the Son of God. Later in this Fourth Gospel we will read of John's witness testified by

⁶ J. C. Ryle, **Expository Thoughts on John**, vol. 1 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), pp. 303f.

many to Jesus. John 10:41 reads, “Then many came to Him and said, ‘John performed no sign, but all the things that John spoke about this Man were true.’” Yes, what John declared of Jesus was true; what Jesus declared regarding Himself was also true, but in addition, His words came with confirming miracles. The Father bore witness to the true identity of Jesus through His works, which was a witness greater than the Father had given through John the Baptist.

However, it should be noted that when our Lord made reference here to His “works”, He was not restricting His works to the miracles He performed, but that His works include His “words.” This is what **Herman Ridderbos** wrote regarding this matter:

As is evident from the previous mention of Jesus’ “works” (cf. vss. 17, 19-20), this term refers to the content of Jesus’ entire mission, his miracles *and his words*; for the words, Jesus’ speaking with the authority of God’s Son “to make alive” and “to judge,” also belong to that which the Father has “granted” Jesus (cf. vss. 22, 26, 27).⁷

But His “works” are more than just His miracles and words, but they include all that he accomplished through His life and death. “The ‘works’ of Jesus, therefore, must be understood to refer to Jesus’ entire mission.”⁸

Back in John 3 we read what the Jewish leaders had concluded regarding Jesus. We read of the initial words of Nicodemus in John 3:1ff.

“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.’”

Nicodemus seemed to be speaking not only of his own knowledge, but that of other Jewish leaders also. He said, “**We** know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” The works of Jesus had born witness to others that He was of God.

Let us remember our context. Jesus was telling His Jewish opposers that they had ample witness given to them of His true identity. John the Baptist had born faithful testimony before them. And the Father had also testified of His true identity through the works He did through Jesus. But in spite of this true and clear testimony, they refused to believe on Him. This shows that merely the observance of Jesus performing miracles and being convinced that God was working through Jesus to perform these miracles, is not sufficient or capable of bring about conversion in those who are lost. Here are the words of **William Hendriksen**,

The works in which Jesus *is engaged* are his (the Father’s) miracles, including the healing of the man at the Pool. These works, to be sure, do not of themselves produce faith. They are never as important as are the *words* of our Lord. Nevertheless, they must not be ignored. They should serve to strengthen faith. Also, they have evidential value, for there was truth in the remark of Nicodemus, “No one can do these signs which you do unless God is with him.” These signs were a seal of the Father’s approval; specifically, of the fact that the Father had *commissioned* him.⁹

The Gospels make a very strong case for the miracles of Jesus having substantiated His identity as the Son of God and doing the work of His heavenly Father. Again, **J. C. Ryle** wrote:

⁷ Herman Ridderbos, **The Gospel of John; A Theological Commentary** (William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 203.

⁸ Edward W. Klink, III, **John**. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), pp. 293.

⁹ William Hendriksen, **John**, New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 1953), p. 208.

This is a distinct appeal to miracles, as an important proof of our Lord's Messiahship and Divinity. Four times in this Gospel we find this same appeal (John 3:2; 10:25; 15:24). The evidence of miracles should never be lightly esteemed. We are apt to underrate their value because they were wrought so long ago. But in the days when they were wrought they were great facts, which demanded the attention of all who saw them, and could not be evaded. Unless the Jews could explain them away, they were bound, as honest and reasonable men, to believe our Lord's Divine mission. That they really were wrought the Jews never appeared to have denied. In fact they dared not attempt to deny them. What they did do was to ascribe them to satanic agency. All who attempt to deny the reality of our Lord's miracles in the present day, would do well to remember that those who had the best opportunity of judging, namely, the men who saw these miracles, and lived within hearing of them, never disputed the fact that they were wrought. If the enemies of our Lord could have proved that His miracles were only tricks, legerdemain, and impostures, it stands to reason they would have been only too glad to show it to the world, and to silence Him forever.¹⁰

Before we move on from this verse, take note of how our Lord very carefully showed the unity of the Father working even as He was working. There is perfect unity between what Jesus does and what the Father does. But just as our Lord carefully showed the unity of His Father and Him in His *works*, elsewhere Jesus gives the same idea regarding the *words* that He spoke. We read in John 17:8 of our Lord's words to His Father, "For I have given to them the *words* which You have given Me."

The witness of the Father to the identity of Jesus as the divine Son of God could not be more clearly asserted by the Gospel writer recording our Lord's words in this verse 36. **Donald Carson** wrote of this:

However valuable the testimony of John the Baptist to Jesus, before a watching world Jesus enjoys *testimony* to his person and mission that is far *weightier*. This weightier testimony is the witness of the Father, which takes several forms. For a start, the works (plural, *contra* NIV) which the Father has given Jesus to finish, and which he is in process of completing, testify that the Father has sent him. These 'works' include all of Jesus' ministry, including the 'signs' which point to the climactic work, the work of redemption achieved in the cross and exaltation of the Lamb of God. Anyone who has followed John's Gospel thus far will know that these works are not some mere demonstration that Jesus is a notable human being, perhaps a prophet, following the conclusion of Nicodemus (3:2). The argument in this verse turns the exposition of the Father/Son relationship found in 5:19-30. All that Jesus does is nothing more and nothing less than what the Father gives him to do. The works he does are thus peculiarly divine: they are the works of God. Once the Father/Son relationship is grasped, everything Jesus does simultaneously attests who he is and who the Father is.¹¹

We might conclude that our Lord's statement of John 5:36 is one of the clearest, indisputable claims to His deity. He and the Father are one in the works they do. The Son shows His unity with the Father in that all that He did and does, the Father did and does. Similarly all that Jesus said, the Father said through those very words. Jesus is the divine Son of God. And Jesus declared that the witness of the Father that He was the Son of God was made very clear to these Jewish leaders who desired to kill Him.

These works bear upon them the hallmark of their divine origin. They show that Jesus is not of human origin, but the Father has sent Him. Jesus' words have particular force, set as they are in the context of the healing of the lame man. Before the very eyes of the Jews there was evidence of divine power. And they rejected it!¹²

C. The witness of the Father Himself (vs. 37-38)

¹⁰ Ryle, vol. 1, pp. 310f.

¹¹ Donald A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 261f.

¹² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 328.

The Lord Jesus went on to say,

³⁷And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. ³⁸But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe.

Some see the statement of verse 37 so similar to what is stated by our Lord in verse 36, that they view this verse as a further explanation of verse 36. They would say, then, that verse 37 does not speak of a third witness, but a further explanation of the second witness that we saw in verse 36. But I believe we should understand Jesus as setting forth a third witness that is in addition to the two He already described. **Edward Klink** wrote of this argument:

The third of four coparticipatory witnesses is the Father (vv. 37-38). The connection between v. 36 and vv. 37-38 is so apparent that “and” might also carry the meaning “and so,” serving not to introduce a new testimony but to draw a conclusion. While it cannot be denied that the witness of the works of Jesus and the witness of the Father are intimately connected, this does not mean that they cannot serve as independent witnesses.¹³

Some have argued that when Jesus spoke here of the Father having testified of Him, that it is speaking specifically of when the Father spoke from heaven when Jesus was baptized, declaring that Jesus was His Son, or on the Mount of Transfiguration when the Father endorsed His Son before His three disciples. But this is too narrow and specific an application. When Jesus said, “And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me”, He expressed the verb, “has testified” in the perfect tense. It declares that “the witness of the Father is both past and present.”¹⁴ Some project this to be the witness of the Father in all of Scripture, but even this might be too narrow. Rather, the Lord was speaking of the continual, far-reaching witness of the Father in and through all things. “This must include ‘all life, in and from the beginning onwards, when rightly understood, has borne witness, as the activity of the Father, to the Lord.’”¹⁵

However, in spite of this continual, persistent witness of the Father, His witness was not received. Jesus said, “***You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form.***” Here we read of the general ***inability*** of mankind to hear God, to know God, or to come into His presence. God is the Creator, who is Spirit and is infinite in His holy nature. And we are creatures who are entirely different in essence than God. We are physical and finite, and therefore incapable of hearing or seeing Him directly or fully.

And then Jesus next declared, “***But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe.***” This speaks of mankind’s ***unwillingness*** to be impacted with the words of God because they refused and failed to believe on the Son of God whom the Father sent into the world.

“From all this we see that the Father’s witness is accessible only to those who believe on the Son. As Barrett says, ‘the observer cannot sit in judgment upon it and then decide whether or not he will believe in Jesus. He must believe in Jesus first and then he will receive the direct testimony from God...’”¹⁶

The witness of the Father was extremely significant for Jesus personally. But to the ones that He was addressing, the witness was unintelligible and inadequate to bring them to faith.

¹³ Klink, p. 293.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Morris, p. 330.

This is the witness that means so much to Jesus. Because He has the witness of God He is not troubled by the opposition of man. But though this witness is so clear and so valuable to Him, He does not anticipate that the Jews will respond to it. Their ignorance is threefold. (i) They have never heard God's voice. Moses heard that voice (Exod. 33:11), but they are no true followers of Moses, otherwise they would have heard God's voice in Jesus (3:34; 17:8). (ii) They have never seen God's form. Israel saw that form (Gen. 32:20f), but they are no true Israelites. Were they, they would have seen God in Jesus (14:9). (iii) They have not God's word abiding in them. The Psalmist laid up God's word in his heart (Psa. 119:11), but they do not share his religious experience. Had they done so they would have received that word from Jesus (17:14). "For" many give the evidence or the cause of the foregoing. The evidence is plain and simple. They do not believe Him whom the Father sent.¹⁷

D. The witness of the Holy Scriptures (vs. 39-40)

Jesus then said,

³⁹You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. ⁴⁰But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.

Here we have one of the most important statements in the Bible on how to understand the Bible rightly. The Lord Jesus was here, of course, referring directly to the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament. One of the unique qualities of historic Reformed Bible interpreters is that they have seen all of Scripture as Christian Scripture. The key to rightly understanding the Bible is to read it as revealing Jesus Christ to us. And so, we advocate interpreting the Old Testament *Christologically*. This is in contrast to those who hold to dispensational theology who claim that they interpret the Bible *literally*.

Here is a good statement about what Jesus was advocating in the words of verses 39 and 40. It is a theological note in a commentary on John by **Edward Klink**:

The Subject Matter of Scripture

With his instruction to his Jewish challengers, Jesus gives to the reader the hermeneutical key for reading the Scriptures, the Old Testament: they were written "about me" (vv. 39, 46). This is neither the position of the human author nor the professor of hermeneutics; it is, rather, an instruction from the Lord. The Bible—yes, even the Old Testament—is about Jesus. To read the Old Testament in another way is, according to Jesus, to read the Old Testament like unbelieving Jews. It is unfortunate that the divide is so wide between covenantal and dispensational methods of interpretation (at least in practice). It is also unfortunate that terms like "literal" have become more political than practical. Jesus is the fullest and ultimate subject matter of Scripture. This does not imply that it speaks about him only implicitly, but that which the Old Testament is speaking about is and has always been about Jesus. To read the Bible in another manner is to read as a non-Christian.¹⁸

In spite of all of their privilege and opportunity, these Jewish leaders refused to believe on the Lord Jesus. He declared to them in verse 40, "But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life." Something more than just information must be given to the lost if they are to come to salvation through Jesus Christ. Their fallen condition is one in which they are woefully incapable and unwilling to come to Jesus Christ for salvation.

Matthew Poole (1624-1679) set forth the meaning and implications of our Lord's words in verses 39 and 40 in this way. It is as if Jesus were saying,

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 329.

¹⁸ Klink, p. 298.

You will not own, embrace, and receive me as the true Messiah and Savior of the world, though that be the only means by which you can obtain that eternal life which you pretend to be seeking after, and rightly think that the Scripture alone can show you the way to. These two verses teach us, 1. That the Holy Scriptures are the only writings which show us the way to life eternal. 2. That not only the Scriptures of the New, but also of the Old Testament, are of use in order thereunto, though the Old Testament Scriptures show us it more darkly, and those of the New testament show it to us more clearly. 3. That both the one and the other point us to Christ, and to receiving and embracing of him, as our Saviour, if we would have life. 4. That it is not sufficient for us to search the Scriptures, to be versed in and acquainted with, unless we, in obedience to them, come to Christ.¹⁹

Conclusion:

The Lord Jesus spoke of both their inability and their refusal to believe the witness of the Father though He testified to them regarding the identity of His Son in these four distinguishable ways. The conclusion that must be drawn is that God must do a great work of grace in the soul or fallen man will not and cannot come to Him. Yes, we are still to bear witness to all people everywhere of the Person of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and thankfully God may use this witness of Christ in the conversion of His people. But as we will soon be in John 6, there the Lord Jesus declares quite clearly in a number of places that in order for people to be saved from their sin, the sovereign grace in God must be at work in order to bring them to know and embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

The Lord has said, “For those who honor Me I will honor,
and those who despise Me shall be lightly esteemed.” (1 Sam. 2:30)

¹⁹ Matthew Poole, **Commentary on the Holy Bible**, vol. 3 (Hendriksen Publishers, 2008), p. 306.