

“Jesus’ Witnesses”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 5.31-40

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The court is in session. The trial begins. Jesus is charged with breaking the Sabbath.

As you know, the Sabbath is a gift from God. It’s part of God’s Way of life for God’s people and, really, for the whole of creation. Jesus broke it. He healed a man on the Sabbath. (Couldn’t he have waited a day?) He told the man to carry his bed-mat away, another Sabbath violation.

Then! He calls himself the “Son” of God the “Father.” He claims he can do things we know only God can do. He claims to give life; only God the Creator can give life. He claims to be the Judge of humanity; only God the Lord can judge us. He can work on the Sabbath because God *his* Father is working. Does he think he is God? Add to Sabbath-breaking another charge, blasphemy.

In Jesus’ day, there were not really courts as we understand them.¹ People brought charges to community leaders. Everyone represented themselves. There were no crown prosecutors or defence attorneys. Nor were there detectives or CSI types. It all depended on witnesses. If your witnesses were more respected and honourable, and if they gave more impressive evidence, you won.

Jesus presents five witnesses in his defence. As you listen, ask yourself: Does Jesus make the case? If not, then what could convince you about him?

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First, Jesus calls himself . . . but then he removes himself from the witness stand!

Listen:

Today’s reading is from the Gospel of John, chapter 5, starting at verse 31. I’ve broken it up for each witness.

[Jesus said to them:]

If I give evidence about myself, my evidence is not true.

John 5.31

Is Jesus admitting to lying!?! Then case closed! Guilty!! We might as well go home too!

¹ Ben Witherington, III, John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 135-136.

Before you pack up, though . . . there was a Jewish saying: “*a person is not worthy of trust [in matters] concerning himself.*”² Testimony we give about ourselves can be self-serving. It’s not a strong foundation for a defence. It’s Jesus credibility that is on trial. I think he is telling the truth, but would his accusers take his word for it?

Fortunately, Jesus has more witnesses. He calls his second:

Another exists who is giving evidence about me, and I know his evidence about me is true.

John 5.32

Okay? . . . who is this “Another”? A surprise witness! Jesus keeps us guessing.³

I wonder . . . much later on, Jesus will promise that God his Father will give “Another” to us.⁴ This “Another”—it’s the same word—will be our Helper, our Comforter, our Advocate,⁵ the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth.⁶ This is the same Spirit who rested on Jesus at his baptism as God said, “This is my beloved Son.”⁷ The Spirit has been working in everything Jesus says and does. The Spirit vouches for Jesus.

The Spirit, God! . . . Can you think of any better witness to give evidence about anyone, Jesus included?⁸

But how do we know when it is the Spirit who is speaking?

Jesus brings up another witness, already known to the court:

You sent a delegation to John [the Baptizer], and he gave evidence to the truth. Although I do not rely human evidence, I remind you of it so that you can be saved. John was a burning and shining lamp, and, at least for a while, you were willing to celebrate in his light.

John 5.33-35

John came to point to the light . . . but do we see?⁹ John loudly proclaimed the One who

² From the Mishnah, quoted in Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 343.

³ Bruner, 344.

⁴ In both John 3:32 and 14:16, the same word, *allos*, is used for “another.”

⁵ All possible translations of the Greek word *parakletos*.

⁶ Bruner argues persuasively that the “Another” in 3:32 is the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit.

⁷ John 1:32-34 and Mark 1:9-11.

⁸ “*We are convinced of the Son’s truthfulness by the accrediting witness of his Father’s Spirit to our minds and hearts. There is no higher proof.*” Bruner, 338.

⁹ John 1:7.

was coming after him . . . but have we been looking?¹⁰ Pointing to Jesus, John said, “*Look! Here is God’s lamb, who is taking away the world’s sin! This is who I was talking about.*” . . . but have we listened?¹¹

People flocked to John. He fired up their hopes and built up excitement. And yet. . . Jesus looks at his accusers, and maybe us too. “*Why are you not listening to John’s evidence?*” John’s evidence is true. John is pointing you to Salvation! But if you’re not listening. . . .

Jesus says he does not depend on John’s nor any human evidence, no matter how true it is. So he calls a fourth witness:

I have a witness greater than John’s evidence. The Father has given me works to do so that I might complete them. These works I do give evidence about me that the Father sent me.

John 5.36

Want to know what God thinks of Jesus? Look at the signs he’s been doing.

We’ve heard about him turning water into wine, healing a dying child, and (just that day) making that paralyzed man walk. These are just a sampling. Jesus is doing many more things.¹² How can he do deeds like these, if God has not sent him? How can he, if he is anything other than the Son who has learned from the Father, and shares in God’s work?¹³

Jesus’ actions are compelling evidence of God’s presence, power and approval in him.

Jesus calls a final witness:

And the Father who sent me has himself given evidence about me. You have never even heard his voice or seen his form, and you don’t have his word dwelling with you because you do not trust the one whom he has sent. You pour over the scriptures, since you think that in them you have deep, lasting life. They also give evidence about me, yet you do not want to come to me so that you can have life.

John 5.37-40

All the readings are adapted from the Common English Bible

¹⁰ John 1:15,19-27.

¹¹ John 1:29-31.

¹² John 2:23. See also 20:30 and 21:25.

¹³ Nicodemus, a leading religious official, realized the accrediting meaning of Jesus’ signs, though he did not realize their full meaning. (John 3:2)

The Scriptures. Jesus means the Torah, the first five books; the Prophets, like Kings and Isaiah; and the Writings, like the Psalms.¹⁴ There was no “New Testament” yet. To his fellow Jews, Jesus says: *“Look at our writings, our Scriptures. You know God has given them to us.”*

These Scriptures are precious. God the Spirit has inspired them. Now get this! Jesus claims that if you read them rightly, you will see Jesus all over the place. They tell us of God, and all God has been doing. The same Story they tell—of Creation, and Catastrophe, and God’s Covenant with Israel—has come to its Climax: Jesus. These Scriptures are filled with foreshadowings. If you are looking rightly, you will see.

It’s like you get to the part of the book where it all clicks together. Then you can thumb back, and see all sorts of things on earlier pages in a new way. Everything takes on a whole new meaning, because the Climax makes sense of it all.

Without these Scriptures, what we call the “Old Testament,” we cannot make sense of Jesus. Now, with Jesus, it all starts to make more sense.

But Jesus looks at his accusers and judges. (He is now showing contempt for the court.) He knows they cannot see it. If they cannot see who Jesus is, then they won’t be able to make true sense of anything about Jesus.¹⁵ It’s like you get to the key point in the book, but you skip over those pages. The rest of the book is still good. But it’s not the same.

III

So, Jesus has called these five witnesses. Two of them are Jesus himself and John the Baptist. Though they are telling the truth, he does not depend on their testimony.

Instead, Jesus points to these three:

- the evidence of the Holy Spirit;
- the evidence of what Jesus is doing, these signs that only God can do;
- the evidence of the Scriptures, which tell God’s Story.

Do they convince you?

Here is how I became convinced.

Looking back, I realize that the Holy Spirit was working on my cynical, dismissive heart. I thought I had it all figured out, including Jesus and Christianity. Really, I didn’t have a clue. The Holy Spirit was opening the door, and then leading me through it, bringing people to

¹⁴ These are the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible, or Tanakh. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tanakh>

¹⁵ “The problem is that the members of the jury, watching and considering their verdict, were not in a fit condition to understand the evidence before them. In verse 37 we see the beginning of Jesus’ charge against his contemporaries, those who watched it all going on and turned away in disbelief.” N. T. Wright, John for Everyone, Part 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 66f.

me and bringing me into circumstances and conversations.

I became convinced that Jesus had done extraordinary things. The evidence was strong, and my doubts said more about me and the biases I'd picked up, than anything about Jesus. Especially, I became convinced he had resurrected from the dead. So God endorsed him—why else would God have raised him?—and God was working in Jesus.

Then, everything else started to make sense. The Story of God in Scripture, yes. Also, the way the world is, the way I am. Not that I have everything figured out, at all! There is so much I wrestle with. But I started learning this new-to-me Story, which is really old. The more I learn it, the more I realize how true it is, how honest it is, and how hopeful it is.

Finally, I've realized it is not really Jesus who is on trial. It is me and you, and everyone. We are asked this question: Who is Jesus? And the next: Will I follow him? So much for us depends on our answer.

May God the Spirit help us know the truth. Amen.