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Leopoldo Sánchez

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, sanchezlc@csl.edu

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Testifying in the Courtroom

Life is one of the apostle's favorite images of salvation, and he makes use of it in the assigned text: "And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son" (1 Jn 5:11). John speaks of eternal life in a forensic context, taking us to a courtroom where God the Father bears witness or testifies to the life he gives us in his Son. In this courtroom drama, God testifies to the reality of life in his Son, against the world, and for our consolation.

In true Johannine fashion, the apostle offers us a contrast between two opposing principles at war with each other, namely, the way of the Son that leads to life and the way of the world that leads to death: "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (v. 12). Each side has its own story or word, its own testimony or judgment, as it were. Each side justifies its way of looking at things. The way of the world sets itself against God's word concerning his Son, and thus against the Son and the eternal life he gives us. It is the way of wrongdoing, of sin leading even to death (cf. vv. 16–17). This is the way of "the evil one," who keeps the world under his seducing "power" (cf. v. 19). It amounts to living under the spell of a lie. Thus the way of the world is to be overcome through *faith* in the Son of God (cf. vv. 4–5), giving the believer spiritual eyes to see reality as God sees it.

The way of life is God's own way of calling a thing what it is. It is far *greater* than "the testimony of men" (v. 9). It is the way of faith in the Son, who is the Truth (cf. Jn 14:6), to whom "the Spirit of truth" testifies in us (1 Jn 5:6b, cf. Jn 14:16–17). In John's teaching, the courtroom takes place inwardly, in our hearts, where faith takes root in the believer, in "everyone who has been born of God" (1 Jn 5:4): "Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself" (v. 10a). This spiritual (i.e., of the Spirit) way of life leads to "the love of God. . . . We keep his commandments" (cf. v. 3), so that "everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning" (cf. v. 18). We live by faith under God's command and protection (cf. v. 18). But why would God need to testify, as in a courtroom, concerning his Son?

Against whom is God defending his Son, and for what purpose? In John's image of the courtroom, the world's judgment is against those born of God, who foolishly put their belief in his Son. Are not death, evil, and sin rampant in the world? God must be a liar. Faith in his Son has not changed anything! This is the testimony of the world against us. Over against this false judgment, God testifies to the truth in order to defend and console his sons against the attacks of the world. The Spirit of truth, the paraclete or defender (defense lawyer, cf. Jn 16:7–11) bears witness to the truth in the sons of God, assuring them that God is right and the world is wrong about the Son. God is no liar. His testimony is true. His judgment concerning the way things really are is trustworthy, in spite of what the world might think, say, or do.

We can be confident that God is trustworthy in his testimony because he always delivers on his word. The apostle reminds God's sons that they have a God who does what he says. The same God has promised to hear our prayers and answer them (1 Jn 5:14–15). Do you want to know if God's testimony is true? Ask God to deliver you from sin, and he will give you life (cf. v. 16). One could extend the argument: Ask God to protect you from "the evil one" and he will not touch you (cf. v. 18). With the spiritual eyes of belief in the Son, we can be sure that God's word is reliable, that we have indeed overcome the world through faith in his Son (cf. vv. 4–5), even when it does not seem like it because of what we see in a world full of evil, sin, and death.

The assigned text can be used to paint a picture of a courtroom for the congregation. Attention can be drawn to the world's judgment against the church, namely, that it is wrong about eternal life in Christ, and thus God is a liar and faith is an illusion. Speak to the evidence the devil ("the ruler of this world," Jn 12:31) brings to the table against the accused (the church), namely, pictures of sin, death, and evil all around us. Then, in a stark contrast, draw attention to God's own judgment concerning the accused. The church need not fear the attacks of the world. It can stand firm because it is right about Jesus and the life God brings us through him. The Spirit of truth is the defense lawyer (Paraclete) through whom God assures the church that faith in the Son is the real deal. And what is God's evidence? His word is enough for our assurance and consolation. But the preacher will also note that the very existence of the church, where disciples are preserved from sin by this word, live by this same word, and respond to it in prayer trusting in God's deliverance, is yet another sign that God is no liar. Life in the Son shines even now in and through the sons of God! Their lives of faith and love for one another are a witness that God's testimony has taken root in their hearts (cf. 1 Jn 3:23–24, 4:7–12).

The preacher will announce God's final verdict on the matter. The devil is a liar. God is telling the truth concerning his Son. The church is not the accused. God has come to its defense. Rather, the church is the beneficiary of God's life through faith in his Son and has the victory over the world and its false claims. Actually, the world and the evil one end up being the accused (cf. Jn 12:31, 16:8–11). Life overcomes death. Faith in the Son assures us of this glad verdict now, even as it trusts in God's final fulfillment of this word at the last day (cf. Jn 6:40).

Leopoldo A. Sánchez M.