

John 16:8-11

Introduction

Throughout John's Gospel, "the world" has been a major theme (78 times in John versus 14 times in Matthew, Mark, and Luke combined). In the first twelve chapters of John the "world" has been the arena (or we could say, the theater) for God's saving work in Jesus (but see 7:7; 8:23; 12:31). So Jesus has come into the world (1:9-10; 3:19; 9:39; 10:36; 11:27); Jesus takes away the sin of the world (1:29); God loved the world (3:16); God sent His Son into the world so that the world might be saved through Him (3:17; 4:42; 12:47); the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven and gives life to the world (6:33, 51); Jesus is the light of the world (8:12; 9:5; 12:46); Jesus speaks to the world what He has heard from His Father (8:26). The world, in these examples, is that which was made through Jesus (1:10) and is now the object of God's love and saving purposes in Jesus.

When we come to the second half of John, however, where it's just Jesus and His disciples in the upper room, or making their way together to the garden of Gethsemane, the "world" is portrayed very differently. Now the world is seen not as the recipient of God's salvation, but rather the incurable and irredeemable enemy of Jesus and of His disciples (cf. 13:1). The world cannot receive the Spirit of truth because it does not see Him or know Him (but the disciples will; 14:17); the world will no longer see Jesus (but the disciples will; 14:19); Jesus will disclose Himself to the disciples, but not to the world (14:22); the ruler of the world is Satan, and He has nothing in Jesus (14:30; cf. 12:31). In chapter fifteen Jesus said to His disciples:

- John 15:18–19 (cf. Jn. 7:7) — "If **the world** hates you, know that it has hated Me first [with respect to] you. If you were of **the world**, **the world** would love its own; but because you are not of **the world**, but I chose you out of **the world**, on account of this **the world** hates you."

Ever since these verses, the guilt of the world, and the world's willful ignorance of God, and the world's inveterate hatred of Jesus' and of His disciples has been the major theme. But now instead of referring to the world as "the world," Jesus suddenly refers to the world as "*they*" – specifically, the Jews (cf. 8:23).

- John 15:20–16:4a — "If **they** persecuted Me... **they** will also persecute you... if **they** kept My word [and they didn't], **they** will keep yours also... all these things **they** will do... because **they** do not know the One who sent Me [contrary to their claims]... If I had not come and spoken to **them** [in person], **they** would not have sin, but now **they** have no cover for **their** sin [their religious zeal having been exposed as fraudulent]... If I had not done among **them** [in person] the works which no one else did, **they** would not have sin; but now **they** have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well... this happened to fulfill the word that is written in **their** Law, '**They** hated Me without cause'... **They** will put you out of the synagogue, but [indeed] an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God... These things **they** will do because **they** did not know the Father or Me [contrary to what they claim]."

Here the *world*, represented as it is by the unbelieving Jews, continues to be seen not as the object of God’s love and saving purposes, but rather as the declared and inveterate enemy of Jesus and so also of His disciples. Last week, we saw how Jesus pauses, at this point, to explain why He had not said these things at the beginning.

- John 16:4b–7 — “These things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to Him who sent Me; and none of you asks Me, ‘Where are You going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.”

The obvious implication, here, is that the coming of the Advocate will in some way be a counter-measure to the Jews’ hatred and persecution of Jesus’ disciples. The Advocate will be sent in order that He might deal with the unbelieving Jews – which is to say, in order that He might deal with the world. So what is the Advocate going to do? We pick up, now, in verse eight of chapter sixteen:

I. John 16:8a — “And He, when He comes, will convict the world...”

Once again, Jesus refers to the world as “the world” (not as “they”). The question is: Are we meant to see the world as the object of God’s love and saving purposes in Jesus (the Spirit will convict the world subjectively so that it feels guilty and will hopefully believe)? Or are we meant to see the world as the incurable and irredeemable enemy of Jesus and of His disciples (the Spirit will convict the world objectively as in a court of law so that it stands condemned – whether it feels guilty or not being irrelevant)?

The preceding context supports the second option; and so also does the following context. Later in this chapter, Jesus will tell His disciples that while they will weep and lament, the world will rejoice (16:20); while they will have tribulation in the world they can take courage because Jesus has overcome the world (16:33). In chapter 17, Jesus will say that He has manifested His Father’s name to the men whom the Father gave Him *out of the world* (17:6); Jesus prays on behalf of those whom His Father has given Him *and not on behalf of the world* (17:9); the world has hated Jesus’ disciples because they are not of the world, even as Jesus is not of the world (17:14); the world has not known the Father, but the disciples have known that the Father sent Jesus (17:25). The world is still seen in these verses as the declared and inveterate enemy of Jesus, and so also of Jesus’ disciples. We see this also in the immediate context:

- John 16:8–9 — “And [the Advocate], when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin... concerning sin, *because they do not believe in Me...*”

Jesus doesn’t say that the Advocate will convict the world “*in order that they might believe in Me,*” but only “*because they do not believe in Me.*” And who is “they”? It’s the unbelieving Jews who hate Jesus and who will also hate and persecute His disciples. “[The Advocate], when He comes, will convict *the world...*” with the result that it will stand condemned.

In combination with this portrayal of “the world,” there’s also the meaning of the verb, “to convict.” The basic meaning of this Greek word is to objectively *prove* or *bring out into the open* a person’s guilt (the wrong things that a person has done).

- 1 Timothy 5:19–20 — Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. Those who continue in sin [those who do not repent], **rebuke [convict]** in the presence of all...
- James 2:9 — If you show partiality, you are committing sin and are **convicted** by the law as transgressors [**proved** by the law to be a transgressor].
- 2 Chronicles 26:20 (cf. Jer. 2:19) — Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at [the king], and behold, he was leprous on his forehead; and they hurried him out of there, and he himself also hastened to get out because the Lord had **convicted/reproved** him. [God proved the guilt of Uzziah by striking him with leprosy.]
- John 3:20 (Eph. 5:11) — ...everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be **exposed** [in this case, a person feels guilty even before he is convicted].

When God objectively exposes and brings into the open the guilt of His children the result will, in the end, always be positive – repentance and purification.

- Proverbs 3:11–12 (cf. 2 Sam. 7:14; Job 5:17; Ezek. 3:26; 1 Cor. 14:24-25; Titus 1:13; Rev. 3:19) — My son, do not reject the discipline of the Lord or loathe His **reproof** [his exposure of your sin via discipline], for whom the Lord loves He **reproves**, even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights.

When God objectively exposes and brings into the open the guilt of the wicked and the apostate, the result is always negative – judgment and condemnation.

- Ezekiel 20:38 — ...I will **convict** those of you who are impious and apostates [LXX]; I will bring them out of the land where they sojourn, but they will not enter the land of Israel.
- Jude 12–16 (cf. Wisdom of Solomon 4:19-20) — These are men... for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever. It was... about these men that Enoch... prophesied, saying, “Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, to *execute judgment* upon all, and to **convict** all the ungodly concerning all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and concerning all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him.” These are grumblers, finding fault, following after their own lusts; they speak arrogantly, flattering people for the sake of gaining an advantage.

The world is never portrayed as God’s child, or the people who belong to the world as God’s children. Here in the second half of John, the world is the incurable enemy of Jesus and of His disciples. Therefore, when the Spirit “*convicts*” *the world* (as in a court of law), the result *for the world* can only be negative: judgment and condemnation.

II. John 16:8b — “And [the Advocate], when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and concerning righteousness and concerning judgment;”

It makes sense to say that the Spirit will convict the world concerning its sin. But in what sense can we say that the Spirit convicts the world, as in a court of law, concerning its righteousness and concerning its judgment? Because this feels so difficult to some, they suggest a different explanation: The Holy Spirit will prove to the world *the truth about its own sin, the truth about Jesus' righteousness, and the truth about God's coming judgment*. But this doesn't seem to fit with the meaning of "convict." If there is any conviction here, it's only a *secondary, subjective response* to the Spirit's *proving* the truth of something. Even if we say that the Spirit will "convict the world of the truth about sin, righteousness, and judgment," this conviction is still *subjective* (to produce a feeling or some other response). Everywhere else that we have the phrase, "to convict [someone] concerning [something]" (*elegxei... peri*), what that someone is convicted of is a specific *fault* of his own, with the subjective response to this conviction being irrelevant to the conviction itself.

- Genesis 21:25 — Abraham **reproved/convicted** Abimelech **concerning** the well of water which the servants of Abimelech had seized [concerning his guilt in this matter; concerning something he had done wrong].
- Luke 3:19 — ...when Herod the tetrarch was **rebuked/convicted** by [John the Baptist] **concerning** Herodias, his brother's wife [concerning his guilt in this matter; concerning what he had done wrong], and **concerning** all the wicked things which Herod had done, Herod also added this to them all: he locked John up in prison.
- Jude 14–15 — "Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to **convict** all the ungodly **concerning** all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and **concerning** all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him."
- John 8:46 — "Which one of you **convicts Me concerning sin?**" [Which one of you proves Me to be guilty of sin; We can't say, here, "Which one of you proves to Me the truth about sin?"]?"

I conclude, then, that when the Advocate comes He will convict the world, as in a court of law, concerning its sin, and concerning its righteousness, and concerning its judgment. So how are we to make sense of this? The key is to remember that the specific representative of the world that Jesus has in mind is still the Jewish people (cf. 8:23). So we read in verse nine:

III. John 16:9 — "And [the Advocate], when He comes, will convict the world... concerning [its] sin, inasmuch as they do not believe in Me;"

This applies ultimately to the whole world, but it applies preeminently, at this point, to the Jewish people. Jesus said to the Jews in chapter eight:

- John 8:24 — "Therefore I said to you that you will die in your **sins**; for unless you **believe** that I am He, you will die in your **sins**."

What is Jesus doing here? He's convicting the Jews concerning their sin. Remember what Jesus just said in chapter fifteen:

- John 15:22, 24 — “If I had not come and spoken to them [the Jews], they would not have **sin**, but now they have no cover for their **sin**... If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have **sin**; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well.”

The work of the Advocate, then, will be to *continue* the work of Jesus by convicting the Jews, as in a court of law, concerning their sin – climactically expressed in their failure to believe in God’s Messiah. The Jews may expel the disciples from the synagogue as sinners and heretics (16:2), but the Holy Spirit, who *advocates* for the disciples, will convict the Jews (and even the whole world), concerning their own sin. Jesus continues in verse ten:

IV. John 16:10 — “And [the Advocate], when He comes, will *convict* the *world*... concerning [its] righteousness, inasmuch as I go to the Father and you no longer see Me;”

If we remember that this conviction is not about producing a subjective response, but only establishing an objective *fact*, the meaning will not be so difficult.

Once again, this applies ultimately to the whole world, but it applies preeminently, at this point, to the Jewish people. The Jews were all about “righteousness,” but they had gone about seeking to attain righteousness in the wrong way. They had taken God’s gracious gift of the Law Covenant and turned it into a means of establishing their own righteousness – a self-righteousness that was the result, first, of their own fleshly pedigree (circumcised children of Abraham) and, second, of their own fleshly striving (keeping the letter of the law). They couldn’t see that through the law comes the knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20), and so they claimed the Law as the sign of their own moral and ethical superiority. The Apostle Paul writes of the Jews:

- Romans 10:3 — For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.

Paul says of himself prior to his conversion that “as to the righteousness which is in the Law,” he was “found blameless” (by his fellow Jews; Phil. 3:6). And Jesus said to the Jews:

- Matthew 5:20 — “I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Right here in John’s Gospel we’ve seen the Jews’ smugness in their own righteousness.

- John 8:39–41 — They answered and said to [Jesus], “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you are Abraham’s children, you would do the deeds of Abraham. But now you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God. This Abraham did not do. You are doing the deeds of your father.” They said to Him, “We were not born of sexual immorality; we have one Father: God.”

What is Jesus doing here? He’s *convicting* the Jews concerning their righteousness.

Why does Jesus say that the Advocate will convict the world of its righteousness *inasmuch as He goes to the Father*? It's the resurrection and ascension of Jesus that vindicates Jesus as the *truly righteous One* (cf. Isa. 53:11; Acts 3:12-15; 7:52; 22:14). And so it's this vindication of Jesus as the truly righteous one that will expose all the righteousness of the Jews as wholly empty and worthless – even as that which further condemns them. Apart from faith in the only truly righteous one—apart from faith in Jesus—all of our righteous deeds, says the prophet Isaiah, are like a filthy, blood-stained garment (Isa. 64:6; cf. Heb. 10:38).

The work of the Advocate will be to *continue* the work of Jesus by convicting the Jews, as in a court of law, concerning their righteousness, inasmuch as Jesus has been vindicated as the only truly righteous one.* The Jews may think that by killing the disciples they're "offering service to God" (righteousness; 16:2), but the Holy Spirit, who *advocates* for the disciples, will convict the Jews (and even the whole world) concerning their "righteousness." Jesus continues in verse eleven:

V. John 16:11 — "And [the Advocate], when He comes, will convict the world... concerning [its] judgment, inasmuch as the ruler of this world has been judged."

It's easy to think, here, of the Advocate convicting the world about the truth of coming judgment. The problem, here, is that this emphasizes the world's subjective response. The Advocate cannot convict the world as in a court of law concerning the fact of coming judgment.† The other problem, here, is that the judgment of which the Spirit convicts the world is *not future*. Jesus said in chapter twelve:

➤ John 12:31 — "Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out."

The point isn't a future judgment. The point is the world's *guilt* and *liability* to a judgment that's *now* – and this given the fact that the ruler of this world has already been cast out. We see the same thing here in chapter sixteen. "[The Advocate], when He comes, will convict the world... concerning [its] judgment [concerning its guilt and liability to a judgment that's *now*] inasmuch as the ruler of this world has [*already*] been judged." This is the summation, or the result, of the previous two points. To convict the Jews concerning their sin (inasmuch as they do not believe in Jesus) and to convict the Jews concerning their righteousness (inasmuch as Jesus goes to the Father and is vindicated as the truly righteous one) is ultimately to convict the Jews concerning

* "You will no longer see Me" seems to indicate, "you will no longer know me according to the flesh because I will be glorified at the Father's right hand."

† So should we think of the Advocate convicting the world concerning the judgments that it has *pronounced* (cf. Carson)? When we remember that the world is represented here by the Jewish people, this could seem to make sense. Jesus said to the Jews:

John 7:24 (cf. 7: 50–51) — "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment."

John 8:15–16 (cf. 5:30) — "You judge according to the flesh; I am not judging anyone. But even if I do judge, *My* judgment is true."

There are two problems with this interpretation. First, it seems redundant. The judgments of the Jews concerning Jesus are really the same thing as their sinful failure to believe in Jesus as well as their own self-righteousness and assumption of Jesus' guilt (cf. Jn. 8:48; 9:16, 24; 10:33; 19:7). But more importantly, the idea that the world will be convicted concerning the judgment it has pronounced doesn't seem to fit with the explanation: "inasmuch as the ruler of this world has been judged" (cf. Jn. 12:31).

the very things that demonstrate their guilt and liability to judgment (a judgment that is *now* inasmuch as the ruler of this world has been judged).

Conclusion

But now we ask: How will the Advocate convict the world, as in a court of law, concerning these things? The simple answer is: In the preaching of the Gospel. Remember what Jesus said to the disciples in chapter fifteen:

- John 15:26–27 — “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, *He will bear witness about Me, and you will bear witness also...*”

How will the Advocate convict the world? Concerning its sin, through our proclamation of Jesus as the one whom God sent into this world (v. 9). Concerning its righteousness, through our proclamation of Jesus as the one who has been vindicated as the truly righteous one by His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of God (v. 10). Concerning its guilt and liability to judgment, through our proclamation of Jesus as the one through whom the ruler of this world has been judged (v. 11). When Jesus was here, He Himself convicted the world of these things. Now that He has gone away, the Advocate continues His work in connection with our preaching of the Gospel.

Could the world, *before* Christ’s coming, have been convicted as in a court of law concerning its sin, concerning its righteousness, and therefore also concerning its guilt and liability to judgment? It could have been, but not in the ultimate sense that it can now, in these last days, through the preaching of the Gospel. Jesus says, “Inasmuch as they do not *believe in Me...* inasmuch as *I go to the Father...* inasmuch as the ruler of this world *has been judged.*” And so it’s the eschatological preaching of the Gospel which is, *to the world*, the ultimate aroma of death (cf. 2 Cor. 2:14-16; 1 Pet. 2:7-8; Jn. 9:39), because in the preaching of the Gospel, the one who advocates for us—the Spirit of truth—is at work to convict the world, as in a court of law, with the result that the world stands condemned. What a terrible thing to be convicted. And yet who among us can escape this conviction?

Now what about the first half of John? What about Jesus coming into the world and taking away the sin of the world? What about God loving the world and sending His Son into the world so that the world might be saved through Him? What about the disciples being chosen so that they should go and bear fruit (15:16)? We know that the ultimate reason for the preaching of the Gospel is not to condemn, but to save (Jn. 3:17; 12:47; Rom. 1:15-17). It’s true that the Spirit convicts the world through the preaching of the Gospel with the result that it stands condemned. This is simply because of what the “*world*” *is*. And yet it’s from “out of” this very world that God is calling all those whom He has given to Jesus; it’s from “out of” this very world that Jesus is calling and bringing in His sheep — and this, too, through the preaching of the Gospel (Jn. 6:37, 39; 10:14-16, 26-29; 15:19; 17:2, 6, 9, 24). Here, then, is an awesome miracle — the miracle that’s been worked in us. When the Gospel came to us and the Spirit convicted us with the result that we stood condemned, the Spirit—at the same time—opened our eyes to *see* that

we had been convicted and declared guilty and to *respond* by crying out for mercy and salvation (cf. Acts 2:36-38, 40; contrast Acts 5:30-33; 7:51-57).

So let us proclaim the Gospel to the world, knowing that it's in this proclamation of the Gospel to the world that the Spirit is advocating for us – always to convict, but also—by God's sovereign, miracle-working grace—to save. Let us remember that we ourselves were once convicted and declared guilty, but that now we have cried out to Jesus and received pardon and forgiveness.

- 2 Corinthians 2:14–16 — Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life.