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THE HOLY SPIRIT'S MINISTRY TOWARD THE WORLD:

AN EXEGESIS OF JOHN 16:8-11

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Introduction

In John chapter 16 Jesus promises His disciples the presence of the Holy Spirit who will come to assist them after Jesus' return to the Father. Even though the focus of the Spirit's ministry is on the disciples, by guiding them into the truth of God's word (16:13), He also has a ministry towards the world of unbelievers. The apostle John writes that the Spirit "will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (16:8) (ESV).¹ While some commentators propose that the righteousness which the Holy Spirit convicts the world of, pertains to the world's hypocritical and insufficient self-righteousness, others interpret this righteousness as Jesus' vindication and justification by the Father. In their view, the Father vindicates the Son, who is guilty in the eyes of the world. Thus, the Holy Spirit would demonstrate Jesus' righteousness and prove His innocence to the world, which rejects him. The view in this present proposal questions both of these interpretations. Instead, it will argue that the righteousness, of which the Spirit gives proof to the world, describes the kind of judgment in which Christ will judge the world. That means the Holy Spirit will give proof to the unbelievers of the righteous judgment with which Jesus will judge them at his second coming. This thesis will be proved by an in-textual analysis of John 16:8-11, an inner-textual analysis of the Gospel of John, and an inter-textual analysis of Paul's preaching in the book of Acts.

Context of John 16:8-11

Jesus' ministry has come to an end and He is only a couple of hours away from his crucifixion. Therefore, he provides his disciples with last instructions, preparing them for His return to the Father. There were many things Jesus had to tell his disciples, and even though it seems that Jesus limited his instructions due to the proximity of His death, He says that His disciples were not able to bear what He had to tell them at this moment (16:8). In v.7 Jesus is not only announcing his departure but also the coming of the παράκλητος,² the helper (ESV, NKJV, NASB), comforter (KJV), or counselor (RSV) which Jesus identifies more clearly in v.12 as the Spirit of truth (τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς ἀληθείας). While Jesus will later explain the Spirit's ministry concerning the disciples (16:13), he first tells them about the Spirit's ministry

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Bible references are from the English Standard Version, 2016.

² Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 766. BDAG translates παράκλητος as "one who appears in another's behalf," "mediator," "intercessor," or "helper."

regarding the unbelieving world (16:8-11). A correct interpretation of the Spirit's ministry is challenging due to the "length" of this passage. The Greek is so compressed that it is difficult to determine what is exactly meant.³ Yet, thanks to the Spirit, who "will guide" (ὁδηγήσει) Christ's disciples "into all truth" (ἐν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ πάσῃ), the disciples can be confident to obtain a right understanding of Jesus' teaching.

Overview of the Main Interpretations

Even though some translations translate the aorist participle as a future active,⁴ since the main verb is future active (ἐλέγξει), this translation is very rare. The conjunction καὶ in connection with the aorist participle ἐλθὼν may be temporal ("when he comes")⁵ or modal-instrumental ("by his coming").⁶ While ἐλθὼν can be temporal or modal-instrumental, none of the two interpretations affects the meaning of the passage. Jesus refers here to the coming of the Holy Spirit. Even though the aorist active participle of ἔρχομαι, using the masculine declension ἐλθὼν, refers back to masculine noun ὁ παράκλητος in v.7, and not to the neuter noun spirit (τὸ πνεῦμα) in v.12, the same "person" is in view – the Holy Spirit.⁷ The following verses have led to five major interpretations. Differences in the interpretation are mainly dependent on two matters: First, the interpretation and translation of the Greek word ἐλέγχω in connection with the preposition περὶ, and second, the interpretation of the three ὅτι-clauses.

According to the first interpretation, the three ὅτι-clauses are taken as an instance of the 'ὅτι-explicative,' in which each clause begins with "in that" giving substance of what is wrong with the world's thinking in these three areas.⁸ The Spirit will prove the world wrong about sin, righteousness, and judgment.⁹ In this view, the world merely holds wrong opinions which must be rightened and corrected by argument.¹⁰ Carson effectively refutes this interpretation, by pointing to John's use of ἐλέγχω in John 8:46. He points out that Jesus surely did not mean "Which of you can prove I have the wrong idea about sin?"¹¹

In the second view, the three ὅτι-clauses are interpreted as explicative and therefore translate περὶ as "in that" or "in regard to," taking ἐλέγχω to mean "to convict." This view understands the Holy Spirit as a legal figure – usually as a counsel of defense – but here as a

³ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Repr. (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press [u.a.], 1998), 534.

⁴ The *God's Word Translation* renders v. 8 as "he will come."

⁵ ESV, NASB, RSV, and MOUNCE translate as "when he comes."

⁶ Harris, *John*, 277.

⁷ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, 9. Repr (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2001), 332.

⁸ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 535.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

prosecuting attorney who convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment.¹² By understanding *περὶ* to mean “in regard to” it is possible to suggest that the references are made to the world’s sin, Christ’s righteousness, and God’s judgment.¹³ This is the view held by Köstenberger,¹⁴ Ridderbos,¹⁵ Schnackenburg,¹⁶ and especially Harris, who shows great confidence in writing “Certainly the Spirit’s role here is that of [a] prosecuting attorney.”¹⁷ Keener too shares that view emphasizing that just like Jesus prosecuted the world (3:20, 8:46), the paraclete continues to prosecute the world through the apostolic preaching of Jesus (16:7).¹⁸ Köstenberger writes that the Holy Spirit will convict the world, that is He will prove the world guilty “by producing definite evidence” regarding the world’s guilt.¹⁹ Carson rejects this reading because it demands that in this case the Spirit would not convict the world of its sin, but prove its guilt to the judge.²⁰ According to Carson, such a reading cannot be justified for two reasons. Primarily because of the New Testament’s usage²¹ of *ἐλέγχω*²² and secondarily because there is no judge in the context.²³

In the third view, the three *ὅτι*-clauses are interpreted explicative, and the interpretation is thus a modification of the first view. In the difference to the first view, this view understands “to prove [the world] wrong about” as being directed to the disciples, rather

¹² Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 535.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 536.

¹⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2004), 472. Köstenberger sees this view as “alternatively” and “more likely” than Carson’s interpretation.

¹⁵ Herman N. Ridderbos and John Vriend, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 532. Ridderbos describes the Holy Spirit as a prosecutor who brings the truth to light with respect to a settled issue.

¹⁶ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Gospel According to St John. Vol 3, Commentary on Chapters 13-21* (London: Burns and Oates, 1982), 128. Schnackenburg writes that the Holy Spirit is an “advocate” or “prosecuting counsel” who “has a very special part to play in Jesus’ battle with the world.”

¹⁷ Harris, *John*, 277.

¹⁸ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2012), 1033.

¹⁹ Köstenberger, *John*, 471.

²⁰ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 535.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 536. Carson explains: “Most of those who adopt this stance unwittingly slide over to the other sense of ‘convict’ in their exposition: the Paraclete is bringing about a sense of guilt in the world. That accords well with the meaning of the verb. However, when the verb is followed by sin which is being held up to elicit the sense of shame and guilt, or by the sinner who performs the evil. To return to 8:46, the question is ‘Can any of you convict me of sin?’, not ‘in regard to’ sin. Without question this is the way the first of the three elements ‘sins and righteousness and judgment’ would be taken if it were not for the presence of the other two: i.e. we would happily read ‘he will convict the world of *its* [i.e the world’s] sin,’ not ‘he will convict the world in regard to sin.’ This translation would be acceptable if it was not for the two following words righteousness and judgment.”

²² *Ibid.*, 534. According to Carson, *ἐλέγχω* occurs 18 times in the NT: (Mt18:15; Lk3:19; Jn 3:20, 8:46; 1 Cor 14:24; Eph 5:11; 13; 1 Tim 5:20; 2 Tim 4:2; Tit 1:9, 13; 2:15; Heb 12:5; Jas 2:9; Jude 15,22; Rev 3:19). Arguably in every instance, according to Carson, the verb has to do with showing someone his sin.

²³ *Ibid.*, 535.

than to the world or an independent judge.²⁴ This, however, is not the most obvious meaning of ἐλέγχω and never takes this meaning in the New Testament or the LXX.²⁵

In the fourth view, the Holy Spirit will expose the world for a verdict of guilt and innocence.²⁶ In this view, ἀμαρτίας is translated as guilt, not sin, and δικαιοσύνη as innocence, not righteousness. Carson rejects such a reading because it entails no conclusion about the guilt of the world.²⁷

Carson favors a fifth view in which the Holy Spirit shames and convicts the world guilty of *its* sin, *its* righteousness, and *its* judgment.²⁸ As opposed to the previous views the three ὅτι-clauses are not interpreted as explicative, but as causal, each cause providing a reason why the Paraclete is engaged in this convicting work.²⁹ For Carson, the conviction of the world's righteousness is parallel with the conviction of its sin, and the "most straightforward way of taking ἐλέγξει περὶ."³⁰ Thus, the Holy Spirit convicts the world of its hypocritical and religious righteousness, which already Isaiah describes as a menstruous cloth (Is 64:5).³¹

Since the second and the fifth view are the most popular among the scholars, they deserve a closer analysis before the content of the current proposal here will be presented. Carson begins his explanation by writing that the usual meaning of ἐλέγχω as to convict in a personal sense leads to shaming the world and convicting it of its own guilt, with the goal of leading to repentance.³² Besides his preferred translations as "putting to shame," he mentions several other translations of ἐλέγχω according to the classical Greek including "treating with contempt," "cross-examining," "accusing," "bringing to the test," "proving," and "refuting."³³ According to Carson, it is the preposition περὶ which introduces what the world is guilty of. The world is guilty of its sin, its righteousness, and its judgment.³⁴ The three ὅτι-clauses in vv.9-11 are causal and each provides a reason why the paraclete is engaged in this convicting work.³⁵ He The Spirit convicts the world first of sin *because* it does not believe, second of righteousness, *because* Jesus is going to the Father, and third of judgment *because* the prince

²⁴ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 536

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 537.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 536.

³¹ Ibid., 537-38.

³² Ibid., 536-37.

³³ Ibid., 534.

³⁴ Ibid., 537.

³⁵ Ibid.

of the world stands now condemned.³⁶ While it is obvious that sin refers to the world and not to God, Carson also attributes δικαιοσύνη and κρίσεως as belonging to the world because of the parallel constructions of περὶ ἁμαρτίας, περὶ δικαιοσύνης, and περὶ κρίσεως. As mentioned before, for Carson, the conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment is the most straightforward way of taking ἐλέγξει περὶ. Carson further strengthens his interpretation by showing that in the other occurrences of ἐλέγξει περὶ, the verb always is either followed by something evil (John 8:46; Jude 15) or by a person who commits evil (Lk 3:19).³⁷ Therefore, according to Carson, δικαιοσύνης and κρίσεως pertain to the evil of the world, and not to God. He writes that already throughout his ministry Jesus has exposed by His light the world's darkness and its empty pretensions (3:19-21; 7:7; 15:22, 24), and now continues this work through the Holy Spirit who enables the disciples to convict the world of its empty righteousness.³⁸ Finally, the paraclete convicts the world of its judgment, which according to Carson is, "multifaceted spiritual blindness."³⁹ He concludes this by referring to Jesus' exhortation in which He commands His audience not to judge by mere appearance but to make a right judgment instead (7:24). Since the world's judgment is "profoundly wrong and morally perverse" the Spirit convicts the world of its false judgment.⁴⁰

Even though Carson's argument for parallelism seems to be strong at first, Keener has a valid objection to this interpretation. He correctly points out, that despite the grammatical parallel structure of the verse, the subject of the subsidiary clauses is quite un-parallel.⁴¹ For this reason, he and the other commentators mentioned above, interpret δικαιοσύνης and κρίσεως as pertaining to Christ and God.

According to Köstenberger, the Spirit does not convict the world of its own δικαιοσύνης, but *in regard to* Jesus' righteousness. Köstenberger writes that the Spirit will first prove the world guilty by producing definitive evidence regarding the world's guilt and second, he will prosecute the world based on the righteousness of Jesus, who is declared just and is vindicated in court.⁴² While Köstenberger acknowledges Carson's view he believes this interpretation to be "more likely."⁴³ This view is also favored by Ridderbos, Murrey-Beasley,⁴⁴

³⁶ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 537-38.

³⁷ Ibid., 535.

³⁸ Ibid., 538.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 536.

⁴¹ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1035.

⁴² Köstenberger, *John*, 427.

⁴³ Ibid., 472.

⁴⁴ George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary. Volume 36: John* / George R. Beasley-Murray, ed. Bruce Manning Metzger et al., Second edition (Nashville, Tenn: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 282.

Keener,⁴⁵ and Harris⁴⁶ who see δικαιοσύνης as Jesus' vindication, in which He is shown to be righteous and innocent. Here especially Ridderbos confidently writes that Jesus is "unmistakably vindicated and proven righteous."⁴⁷ Even though several commentators leave the answer of who is going to judge the world without an answer, Harris⁴⁸ and Schnackenburg⁴⁹ ascribe the execution of the mentioned judgment to God. While all these commentators interpret δικαιοσύνης in connection with Jesus' vindication and justification, Schnackenburg is the only one who somewhat connects δικαιοσύνης and κρίσεως in his interpretation. He writes, that "in this forensic context . . . 'righteousness' is also related to the judgment passed on the world."⁵⁰ Unfortunately, Schnackenburg does not develop this thought further and continues his interpretation just like the other commentators, writing that the world is shown to be wrong in that justice is done to Jesus.⁵¹

A New Proposal

In light of these differing opinions, this paper wants to invite its audience to consider another interpretation, in which δικαιοσύνης is not interpreted as Jesus' vindication or justification, but as the characteristic in which Christ will judge the world. In order to arrive at this conclusion, one has to consider the following: 1) The correct meaning of ἐλέγχω in the Greek language, 2) the actual meaning of possible English translations such as "to convince," "to convict," or "to expose" and 3) the use of John's judgment terminology throughout his gospel.

In the original language, the exact activity of the Spirit in regard to the world is not that easy to determine, due to the wide semantic range of the verb ἐλέγχω. BDAG offers four major possible translations of the verb, and translates it in 16:8 as "to bring a person to the point of recognizing wrongdoing."⁵² The Cambridge Greek Lexicon does not include a translation of ἐλέγχω in the context of 16:8, but offers nine possible translations: 1) to treat with contempt, scorn, bring shame on, disgrace, put to shame, show up; 2) to cross-examine, question, ask, ask about, hold an inquiry about someone; 3) to examine, test, conduct a judicial inquiry someone; 4) to refute, confute someone; 5) to blame, find fault with, accuse,

⁴⁵ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1035.

⁴⁶ Harris, *John*, 277.

⁴⁷ Ridderbos and Vriend, *The Gospel According to John*, 533.

⁴⁸ Harris, *John*, 277.

⁴⁹ Schnackenburg, *Gospel According to St John. Vol 3, Commentary on Chapters 13-21*, 131.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 131.

⁵¹ Ibid., 131.

⁵² Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 315. Possible translations of ἐλέγχω are 1) "to scrutinize or examine carefully, to bring to light, expose, set forth;" 2) "to express strong disapproval of someone's action, to reprove, to correct;" 3) "to penalize for wrongdoing, punish, discipline;" 4) "to bring a person to the point of recognizing wrongdoing."

charge someone; 6) to expose, give proof a deed or state of affairs, 7) to expose; 8) to prove own's case and 9) to prove, draw conclusions.⁵³

Amid these possible English translations, “to convince,” “to convict,” and “to expose” are the most common ones.

Along with the RSV, at least eight other translations (AMPC,⁵⁴ DRA,⁵⁵ EXB,⁵⁶ GW,⁵⁷ NOG,⁵⁸ RSVCE,⁵⁹ PHILLIPS⁶⁰, TLB⁶¹) translate ἐλέγχω as “to convince.” This translation, however, should be rejected because it assumes a necessary positive outcome, resulting in a change of mind every time the Spirit works. Yet this does not seem to be the case, since there are people who reject the Spirit (Acts 7:51), and therefore are apparently not convinced by Him and His ministry.

The ESV, NKJV, NASB, and at least twenty-five other translations translate ἐλέγχω as “to convict.” This is also the favored rendering of several scholars including Carson,⁶² Köstenberger,⁶³ Morris,⁶⁴ and Harris⁶⁵ who translate ἐλέγχω as “to convict.” Now, while this translation is perfectly consistent in the case of Carson's interpretation – since he understands δικαιοσύνης and κρίσεως as belonging to the world – the English meaning of “to convict” contradicts at least the usage Köstenberger and Harris, who both advocate for Jesus' justification and vindication. Merriam-Webster defines “to convict” as “to find or prove to be guilty” or “to convince of error or sinfulness.”⁶⁶ While the former definition agrees with Carson's interpretation, it does not agree with the interpretation of Harris and Köstenberger, since their translation of “to convict” necessarily presupposes something that would lead to guilt. This, however, can certainly not be the case for δικαιοσύνης and κρίσεως. Ultimately, as proposed in the second possible translation, to translate ἐλέγχω as “to convince of error or sinfulness” leads to the dilemma that has already been refuted.

⁵³ James Diggle, ed., *The Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 467.

⁵⁴ *Amplified Bible, Classic Edition*.

⁵⁵ *Douy-Rheims 1899 American Edion*.

⁵⁶ *Expanded Bible*.

⁵⁷ *God's Word Translation*.

⁵⁸ *Names of God Bible*.

⁵⁹ *Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition*.

⁶⁰ *J.B. Phillips New Testament*.

⁶¹ *The Living Bible*.

⁶² Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 534.

⁶³ Köstenberger, *John*, 471.

⁶⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, Rev. ed., [Nachdr.], *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 659.

⁶⁵ Harris, *John*, 277.

⁶⁶ Merriam-Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/convict>; entered 9/25/2023.

Yet another possible translation of ἐλέγχω is “to expose.” While Köstenberger⁶⁷ also allows for the translation “to expose,” it is the main interpretation according to Schnackenburg,⁶⁸ and Beasley-Murray.⁶⁹ Schnackenburg writes that the key passages for a proper interpretation of ἐλέγχω are John 3:20 and 8:46, where the word is more narrowly defined.⁷⁰ Why Schnackenburg points to John 8:46 in order to justify his translation is not obvious, since not a single translation translates ἐλέγχω of “to expose” in this context. In John 3:20, however, the NIV, ESV, NASB, and NKJV translate ἐλέγχω as to exposed (KJV translates as reproved), which also accords BDAG’s interpretation in this context, interpreting it as “to bring to light” or “to expose.”⁷¹ While Carson first doubts the translation “to expose” writing that it receives only little emphasis in LSJ,⁷² he uses the translation of “to expose” later in his explanation and thus seems to be at least somewhat inconsistent in his interpretation.⁷³ Merriam-Webster’s definition of “to expose” as “to cause to be visible,” “open to view” or “to display” and “to make known or to bring to light” fit the context of v.8 better than translations as “to convince” and “to convict.” Therefore, it seems that in comparison to the other two main translations, “to expose” is the preferred one in 16:8. This translation is also offered by at least five different translations (including the EXB,⁷⁴ PHILLIPS,⁷⁵ MSG,⁷⁶ OJB,⁷⁷ VOICE⁷⁸) which are all ironically looser translations. However, in light of the wide semantic range of ἐλέγχω, there may be an even better translation than “to expose.”

As already mentioned before the Cambridge Greek Lexicon offers a very wide range of possible meanings for ἐλέγχω. One of these translations may fit the context of 16:8 even better than “to expose.” Alongside “to expose” the Lexicon also offers the possibility to translate ἐλέγχω as “to give proof of a deed or state of affairs.”⁷⁹ There are several reasons why this translation may be a better translation than the other ones in the context of 16:8: First because this translation entails the evidence of something; second, because it does not assume

⁶⁷ Köstenberger, *John*, 472.

⁶⁸ Schnackenburg, *Gospel According to St John. Vol 3, Commentary on Chapters 13-21*, 123.

⁶⁹ Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary. Volume 36*, 281.

⁷⁰ Schnackenburg, *Gospel According to St John. Vol 3, Commentary on Chapters 13-21*, 123.

⁷¹ Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 315.

⁷² H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, new edition revised by H. S. Jones and R. Mackenzie, 2 vols., (Oxford University Press, 1940), 531.

⁷³ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 538.

⁷⁴ *Expanded Bible*.

⁷⁵ *J.B. Phillips New Testament*.

⁷⁶ *The Message*.

⁷⁷ *The Orthodox Jewish Bible*.

⁷⁸ *The Voice*.

⁷⁹ James Diggle, ed., *The Cambridge Greek Lexicon*, 467.

a positive outcome which results in a change of mind, like in the case of “to convince;” third, because as opposed to the translation “to convict,” it allows for a shift from the world’s sin to Jesus’ righteousness and judgment; fourth, because it fits the context of trial better than “to expose” does. This translation is very similar to one of the translations offered by Köstenberger, who writes that the Holy Spirit will convict the world, that is He will prove it guilty “by producing definite evidence” regarding the world’s guilt.⁸⁰ While Carson rejects the idea that the Holy Spirit fulfills the role of a prosecutor and denies the similarity of 16:8-11 to a courtroom situation, Köstenberger, Ridderbos, Schnackenburg, and Harris would have plenty of biblical evidence for such an interpretation. Not only because 16:8 is right before the trials of Jesus before the Jewish authorities (18:1-27) and Pilate (18:28-40) but also because of the trial motif which is evident in John’s judgment terminology that runs through all of John’s gospel (3:16-18; 5:22, 27; 30; 7:24; 8:16; 9:39; 12:31; 16:8-11). The only objection to the Spirit’s role as a prosecutor may be that the *παράκλητος* does not prove this evidence to a judge, which could be God in this context, but to the world. The object of *ἐλέγχω* is not God, but *τὸν κόσμον*. Thus, the Spirit gives proof of *ἁμαρτίας*, *δικαιοσύνης* and *κρίσεως* to the world.

Having analyzed the possible interpretations concerning *ἐλέγχω* and proposed the translation as “to give proof of a deed or state of affairs” the next step is now to analyze the meaning of *ἁμαρτίας*, *δικαιοσύνης*, and *κρίσεως*. Morris correctly notes that all three aspects of the work of the Spirit are interpreted Christologically, and ought to be understood because of the way they relate to Christ.⁸¹

Each of the three nouns is anarthrous, which in the case of *ἁμαρτίας* may lead to the conclusion that the Holy Spirit does not give proof of a specific sin, but of man’s sin in general. Yet, the explanation for the Spirit’s proof in v.9 shows that Jesus has a specific sin in mind. He refers here specifically to the sin of unbelief which is the one sin that will lead a person to condemnation. The Spirit gives proof of sin because the world does not believe in Jesus (*ὅτι οὐ πιστεύουσιν εἰς ἐμέ*). Even though the third person plural is used, Jesus still refers to *τὸν κόσμον* in v.8, since both *ἐλέγχω* and *ἁμαρτίας* and *πιστεύουσιν* and *ἁμαρτία* are related.

Secondly, the Spirit gives proof of *δικαιοσύνη*. Carson correctly notes that since this is the only place in which *δικαιοσύνη* appears in the gospel of John, context must determine its exact force.⁸² However, while Carson’s interpretation still fits well here, he will run into

⁸⁰ Köstenberger, *John*, 471.

⁸¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 618.

⁸² Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 537.

problems that will be addressed in the analysis of κρίσεως. The bigger problem appears here for Köstenberger, Ribberbos, Murrey-Beasley,⁸³ Keener,⁸⁴ and Harris⁸⁵ who see δικαιοσύνης as Jesus' vindication, in which Jesus is shown to be righteous and innocent. Such an interpretation may make sense in the context of Jesus' verdict before Pilate and the Jewish leaders, but it does not make as much sense in John's trial motif throughout the gospel. Even though there are instances in which Jesus seems to defend himself, as for example in 8:46, this seems to be an exception. Köstenberger himself writes that "in John, it is not Jesus who is on trial but the world."⁸⁶ If that is the case, then his interpretation of Jesus' vindication does not make sense here. If it is the world that is on trial and not Jesus, why would Jesus need vindication? Vindication is needed by the one who is accused, which in this case is the unbelieving world and not Jesus. Also somewhat contradicting at this point is Harris' interpretation. First, he writes that the role of the Spirit is certainly the role of a prosecuting attorney and "not counsel for the defense."⁸⁷ Yet, two paragraphs later he writes that Jesus' return vindicates His innocence and righteousness.⁸⁸ Thus, while he first explicitly denies a defensive role of the Holy Spirit, he later indirectly implies such a role in his interpretation, by writing that Jesus is proved to be innocent by his return to the Father. However, there is a translation of δικαιοσύνης that would fit both, John's general judgment motif in the gospel and the immediate context of 16:8-11. If δικαιοσύνης describes the kind of judgment that Jesus executes, rather than His vindication, this interpretation would not only fit John's trial motif in the wider context of the gospel, but it would further build a logical conclusion between the world's sin and the future judgment in the narrower context of this passage. Since Jesus is the righteous judge, He will judge the world for its sin of unbelief.

Regarding John's trial motif throughout the gospel (3:16-18; 5:22, 27; 30; 7:24; 8:16; 9:39; 12:31; 16:8-11), there is one that may confirm the interpretation of a righteous judgment, rather than the idea of Jesus' vindication. Already in 5:22 and 5:27, Jesus tells His audience that the Father has given him the authority to judge. While Jesus first addresses the fact that He has the right to judge, He further explains what kind of judgment he will execute. In John 5:30 Jesus says "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me." Even though 5:30 does not

⁸³ George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary. Volume 36: John* / George R. Beasley-Murray, ed. Bruce Manning Metzger et al., Second edition (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 282.

⁸⁴ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1035.

⁸⁵ Harris, *John*, 277.

⁸⁶ Köstenberger, *John*, 471.

⁸⁷ Harris, *John*, 277.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

use the word δικαιοσύνη, John's choice of words here (καὶ ἡ κρίσις ἢ ἐμὴ δικαία⁸⁹ ἐστίν), confirms the idea that δικαιοσύνη, may not refer to Jesus' vindication, but to the kind of judgment He will execute in the future. In the gospel of John, it is not Jesus who is on trial and in need of someone who vindicates Him. He is the judge. As Morris points out correctly, ἀμαρτίας, δικαιοσύνης, and κρίσεως should be interpreted according to their relationship to Christ. And since John presents Jesus as the righteous and just judge, it would make more sense to interpret δικαιοσύνη in 16:8-11 in relationship to His judgment, and not His vindication. If this interpretation turns out to be true, then Carson's claim that there is no judge in the context would be refuted.⁹⁰

The second reason why δικαιοσύνης should be interpreted as Jesus' righteous judgment is because this translation would provide a smoother transition from the world's sin to the coming judgment. Since Jesus is righteous and just, judgment will come upon the world, just like it already came on the ruler of this world, the devil (v.11). Since Jesus is going to the Father (ὅτι πρὸς τὸν πατέρα ὑπάγω), the Holy Spirit will now give proof of Jesus' righteous judgment to the unbelieving world, just like Jesus already did throughout his ministry. While the reason for the Spirit's proof of δικαιοσύνης seems strange at first there may be a reason why Jesus refers to his departure to the Father specifically. Maybe Jesus refers to his return to the Father as an explanation, because in some instances Jesus referred to His coming from the Father in relation to His judgment (5:30; 8:36).

The last proof the Spirit will present to the world is regarding κρίσεως. While grammatically Carson's interpretation could have been approved up to this point, it does not fit Jesus' explanation for judgment here. Carson is right in his claim that the world's judgment is profoundly wrong and morally perverse, but the question is if this is the kind of judgment Jesus has in mind here.⁹¹ The proof of judgment seems to come because of the judgment that has been previously received and not executed by the ruler of the world (ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ κόσμου τούτου κέκριται). Κέκριται is a perfect passive and not a perfect active. Therefore, it should be interpreted as the judgment or condemnation that the world will receive on the day of judgment, and not as the execution of its own corrupt judgment. The other author's interpretation of δικαιοσύνης as innocence and vindication at this point is explained by their different opinion regarding the identity of the judge. They attribute the execution of the judgment more generally to "God" rather than specifically to Jesus. While several authors

⁸⁹ Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 246. BDAG translates *δικαία* as "upright, fair and just."

⁹⁰ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 535.

⁹¹ Ibid., 536.

leave the question of who will judge the world without an answer, Schnackenburg⁹² and especially Harris seem to attribute the judgment to the Father and not the Son. Harris writes that “the Spirit’s convicting work. . . relates to the world’s sin (v.9), Christ’s righteousness (v.10), and God’s judgment.”⁹³ Harris’ distinction between Christ and God, seems to indicate that it is God the Father who will judge the world and not Jesus. In 5:22, however, Jesus says that the Father does not judge anybody, but that He has given all judgment to the Son (οὐδὲ γὰρ ὁ πατήρ κρίνει οὐδένα, ἀλλὰ τὴν κρίσιν πᾶσαν δέδωκεν τῷ υἱῷ).

The last question that has to be answered before one can give an adequate translation and interpretation of the text, is the following: What is the meaning of κρίσεως and κέκριται? While the ESV, NASB, KJV, and NKJV render both terms as “judgment” and “judged” the NIV refers to “judgment” and “condemned.” Mounce also follows the translation of the NIV. Carson,⁹⁴ Köstenberger,⁹⁵ and Keener⁹⁶ refer to both “condemnation and condemned” and “judgment and judged.” Even though it does not seem as if there is a debate over the right translation of κρίσεως and κέκριται, the translations of “judgment and judged” are to be preferred in the view present here, due to the connections to Jesus’ righteous judgment in 5:30, where Jesus’ judgment and not His condemnation is described as just. At least fifty-five translations translate κρίσις in 5:30 as “judgment” and not a single translation offers the translation of “condemnation.” Kistemaker correctly notes the message of divine judgment causes people either to confess their sins and believe in Christ or to harden their hearts and turn away from God (Acts 24:25-26).⁹⁷ After the discussion concerning the different possible interpretations and translations, it is now time to provide a full translation of the Greek text and summarize what has been argued so far.

Translation and Summary

⁸ καὶ ἐλθὼν ἐκεῖνος ἐλέγξει τὸν κόσμον
περὶ ἁμαρτίας καὶ περὶ δικαιοσύνης καὶ
περὶ κρίσεως· ⁹ περὶ ἁμαρτίας μὲν, ὅτι οὐ
πιστεύουσιν εἰς ἐμέ· ¹⁰ περὶ δικαιοσύνης
δέ, ὅτι πρὸς τὸν πατέρα ὑπάγω καὶ οὐκέτι

θεωρεῖτέ με· ¹¹ περὶ δὲ κρίσεως, ὅτι ὁ
ἄρχων τοῦ κόσμου τούτου κέκριται.

⁸ and when He comes, he will give proof to
the world in regard to sin, and in regard to

⁹² Schnackenburg, *Gospel According to St John. Vol 3, Commentary on Chapters 13-21*, 128-31.

⁹³ Harris, *John*, 277.

⁹⁴ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 538.

⁹⁵ Köstenberger, *John*, 472.

⁹⁶ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1034.

⁹⁷ Simon J. Kistemaker, ed., *New Testament Commentary. Acts: Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, 2. print (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1992), 639.

righteousness and **in regard to judgment**.⁹
in regard to sin, because they do not
 believe in me;¹⁰ **in regard to** righteousness
 because I am going to the Father, and you

will see me no longer;¹¹ **in regard to**
judgment, because the ruler of this world
has been judged already.

Concerning the translation of ἐλέγξει περὶ and the ὅτι -clauses:

It has been argued that the translation “to convince” is to be rejected due to the wrong assumption that the world will change its mind every time the Spirit works. Such an assumption is refuted by Acts 7:51. The translation “to convict,” does not fit the context because it necessarily presupposes something that would lead to guilt. This, however, cannot be the case for Jesus’ justice and judgment. While the translation “to expose” would be acceptable in the context, it does not fit John’s trial motif as well as the translation “to give proof. The three ὅτι-clauses in vv.9-11 are not causal but explicative, and therefore, περὶ to be translated as “in regard to” and not as “of its” sin, righteousness, and judgment.

Concerning the translation κρίσεως and κέκριται

The translations of “judgment” and “judged” are to be preferred over the translations “condemnation” and “condemned,” because it is Jesus’ judgment and not his condemnation that is said to be just and righteous in 5:30.

Conclusion and Intertextual Confirmation

It has been argued that the ministry of the Spirit consists of giving proof to the world of the kind of judgment in which Christ will judge the world. He has been given the authority from the Father to judge (5:22, 27) and will execute this judgment righteously and just (5:30; 8:16). Such an interpretation does not only fit Jesus’ role as judge better but also connects the world’s sin with the coming judgment. This proposal does not deny the world’s corrupt and hypocritical righteousness, nor Jesus’ innocence and vindication which is taught in the scriptures (John 8:29; 19:4; Is 53:9; 1 Pt 2:22; 2 Cor 5:21). Yet, this proposal doubts and rejects such an interpretation in John 16:8-11 due to the given reasons.

This proposal further finds its confirmation in Paul’s preaching throughout the book of Acts. If the ministry of the Holy Spirit is carried out through the preaching of Jesus’ disciples, their preaching should reflect the points of sin, righteousness, and judgment. In the book of Acts are at least two instances in which Paul addresses the matters of righteousness and judgment. The first time in his preaching at the Areopagus in Athens (17:31), and the second time in his encounter with Governor Felix (24:25). While in his conversation with Felix,

Paul's use of καὶ τοῦ κρίματος τοῦ μέλλοντος, proves the interpretation of a judgment that is received by the world and not executed by it, his use of δικαιοσύνη may possibly fit Carson's understanding of man's corrupt righteousness, in light of the topic of self-control (ἐγκρατείας). Bock advocates for such an interpretation, as opposed to divine justice, because self-control seems to indicate a personal moral dimension.⁹⁸ However, even though he rejects the connection of δικαιοσύνη to κρίματος τοῦ μέλλοντος, he does recognize that "Jesus' role as an exalted judge is a major point."⁹⁹

The Spirit's proof of Jesus' righteous judgment is more obvious in his sermon at the Areopagus. Here Paul warns his audience that God has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness, by a man whom he has appointed (καθότι ἔστησεν ἡμέραν ἐν ᾗ μέλλει κρίνειν τὴν οἰκουμένην ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ ἐν ἀνδρὶ ᾧ ὥρισεν). Here Paul's preaching reflects the Spirit's proof of a righteous judgment that will be executed by no other than Jesus. Just like Jesus' preaching on righteous judgment, Paul's preaching does not seem to argue for Jesus' vindication but for the characteristic of his judgment. Thus, the theme of Jesus' righteous judgment is not only apparent in the inner context of the gospel of John but is also seen inter-contextually in the book of Acts. This is another reason to interpret the ministry of the Holy Spirit in connection with Jesus' righteous judgment rather than with his vindication.

Application

The reason why the author chose to address this topic is because one's interpretation of John 16:8-11 may deeply affect a person's evangelism. If the Spirit's ministry consists of giving proof to the world regarding the kind of judgment in which Christ will judge, the church should emphasize this aspect. If someone follows Carson's interpretation he will probably focus on man's corrupt righteousness and judgment. If someone understands righteousness as Jesus' vindication, he will probably emphasize Jesus' innocence. While these things can and should be part of each presentation of the gospel, they should never replace or decrease the emphasis on the coming righteous judgment of Jesus. Just like Paul's presentation of Jesus' righteous judgment represents the Spirit's ministry towards the world, the church's evangelism today should be in accord with the Spirit's work.

⁹⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2007), 695.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 695.

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