

THE PARACLETE'S MINISTRY OF CONVICTION:  
ANOTHER LOOK AT JOHN 16:8–11

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Who among us has not heard a person described as “being under conviction”? Occasionally sermons are said to be full of conviction, and sometimes they are even said to be lacking in conviction. Christians often recount their experience of feeling convicted of their sin prior to conversion. The word “conviction” is used quite commonly to refer to a work performed by the Holy Spirit, and presumably people employ the term intending to communicate a theological concept. Yet as one examines scholarly literature, works dealing with the Holy Spirit’s ministry of conviction are sparse. Many of the major systematic theologies avoid the topic altogether; others deal with it in only a paragraph or two.<sup>1</sup> One looks in vain for a scholarly volume on the subject. Part of the reason for this omission is the fact that there is little biblical material to work with that is directly related to conviction.

The key passage concerning the Holy Spirit’s convicting ministry is John 16:8–11. Unfortunately, this section is fraught with interpretive challenges to the point that nearly all commentators preface their discussion of John 16:8–11 with a disclaimer about the difficulties involved in interpreting the passage.<sup>2</sup> John’s short summary of Christ’s teaching about conviction has given rise to a wide variety of interpretations.<sup>3</sup> At least seven major views have been proposed, and slightly nuanced forms of these interpretations can be found in some of the more recent commentaries.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Among the evangelical systematic theologies, Lewis Sperry Chafer offers the longest discussion of conviction (*Systematic Theology* [8 vols.; Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948] 3.210–24). Erickson’s treatment of the subject in five lines is much more typical (Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* [2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998] 275–76).

<sup>2</sup> Brown writes: “Commentators have not found the detailed exposition of 8–11 easy. Augustine avoided the passage as very difficult; Thomas Aquinas cited opinions but gave none of his own; Maldonatus found it among the most obscure in the Gospel” (Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* [2 vols.; AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966] 2.711). Leaney describes this passage as “notoriously difficult” (A. R. C. Leaney, “The Johannine Paraclete and the Qumran Scrolls,” in *John and Qumran* [ed. James H. Charlesworth; London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1972] 44).

<sup>3</sup> It would be nearly impossible to confirm Lutkemeyer’s claim that “there is no text in Scripture concerning which there are more different interpretations.” However, his statement suggests the difficulties which face the interpreter of this passage (Lawrence J. Lutkemeyer, “The Role of the Paraclete [Jn. 16:7–15],” *CBQ* 8 [1946] 220).

<sup>4</sup> D. A. Carson provides an excellent summary of the major interpretations of John 16:8–11. He explains six views and then offers his own understanding of the passage (“The Function of the Paraclete in John 16:7–11,” *JBL* 98 [1979] 547–66).

Although alternate interpretations will be mentioned, this essay will not attempt to present and evaluate every suggested interpretation of John 16:8–11. Instead, this writer will focus on properly exegeting the passage and seeking to determine what it teaches about the Holy Spirit's ministry of conviction. This information will also be considered in light of a few other biblical passages and theological issues. Of the major views, Carson's understanding of John 16:8–11 seems the most accurate.<sup>5</sup> However, a slightly modified form of his interpretation will be proposed and defended.

#### I. INTERPRETING JOHN 16:8–11

On the night of his betrayal, Jesus met with his disciples in the upper room to eat a final meal with them and to give them instructions about what was to come. Jesus announced that he soon would be leaving them and that, in his absence, the disciples would bear the brunt of the world's hatred against him. Jesus warned his disciples that they would be persecuted without mercy and that people would kill them in an effort to please God (16:2). In light of the disciples' responsibility to testify about Christ in the face of strong opposition, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to aid them. Part of the Holy Spirit's assisting ministry would involve a work of convicting the world. The words of Christ in John 16:8–11 explain the Holy Spirit's ministry of conviction. As part of Jesus' final instructions to his disciples, these words were meant to reassure the disciples that they would not be left to carry out their responsibilities in their own power. Christ's teaching, as it is recorded by John, forms the basis for understanding the Holy Spirit's convicting ministry.

Christ's promise recorded in John 16:8–11 is the fourth of five Paraclete sayings which John records.<sup>6</sup> In the third Paraclete passage, which immediately precedes John 16, Jesus identifies the Paraclete as the Spirit of truth. He declares that the Spirit will testify about Christ even as the disciples must bear testimony about him (15:26–27). The fourth Paraclete saying explains the Holy Spirit's work of testifying to the world about Jesus. This testifying ministry of the Holy Spirit involves what John identifies as ἐλέγχω.

1. *Meaning of ἐλέγχω.* Outside of the NT, ἐλέγχω has a broad semantic range.<sup>7</sup> A number of studies have attempted to unravel the essential mean-

<sup>5</sup> In addition to the article mentioned above, D. A. Carson has explained his interpretation of John 16:8–11 in several other works (*The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus: An Exposition of John 14–17* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980] 138–48; *The Gospel According to John* [PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991] 534–39).

<sup>6</sup> The other Paraclete sayings are found in John 14:15–17, 26; 15:26–27; and 16:12–15. In the NT, the term "Paraclete" is used only in John's writings. For helpful discussions on the background and meaning of this term see Kenneth Grayston, "The Meaning of PARAKLĒTOS," *JSNT* 13 (1981) 67–82; Revi J. Mathews, "The Spirit-Paraclete in the Testament of Jesus According to Saint John's Gospel" (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 1992) 2–16; and Raymond E. Brown, "The Paraclete in the Fourth Gospel," *NTS* 13 (1967) 113–32.

<sup>7</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (2d ed.; WBC; Nashville: Nelson, 1999) 280. Büchsel notes that in extrabiblical literature usage of this term is "very complicated" ("ἐλέγχω," *TDNT* 2.473).

ing of this term based on its usage in secular literature.<sup>8</sup> However, such studies have done little to further understanding of what this term signifies in the NT. Outside the NT, ἐλέγχω is clearly used in ways in which it is not used in the NT, and NT usage is more directly connected to the meaning of ἐλέγχω in the OT than it is to secular usage.<sup>9</sup>

In the LXX, ἐλέγχω is generally used to translate the hiphil of נָצַח ("to rebuke, prove, correct, or convict").<sup>10</sup> By far the most common meaning of ἐλέγχω in the OT is to rebuke a person about a wrong committed or an action being contemplated.<sup>11</sup> In Gen 31:42, Jacob states that God rebuked Laban for treating him poorly. The idea is that Laban had done something wrong, and God pointed it out and reproved him for it. In Lev 19:17, the Israelites are instructed to rebuke their neighbor when he sins rather than harboring hatred in their hearts and sharing in their neighbor's guilt by letting him continue in sin. Again, the thought involves confronting a person about sin. Implied in this is the act of exhorting the sinner to repent. Throughout the book of Proverbs, ἐλέγχω is used to communicate the idea of rebuking or correcting a person with the goal of changing his behavior. A wise person will listen to correction and grow wiser (Prov 9:8; 19:25). But a fool will despise the one who reproves him (Prov 9:7–8). As will be seen later, the idea of rebuking another person or showing another person his sin for the purpose of repentance is the most common meaning of ἐλέγχω not only in the LXX but also in the NT.

The verb ἐλέγχω is sometimes used in the LXX to convey the thought of making a decision or a judgment about something.<sup>12</sup> After Rachel stole some of her father's household idols, Laban pursued Jacob and his entourage to recapture his stolen property. In the ensuing confrontation, Jacob challenged Laban to present the evidence and let their relatives judge between them (Gen 31:37). Here ἐλέγχω signifies the idea of making a decision to decide a dispute. This meaning is also seen in Mic 4:3 where the prophet foresees an eschatological day when the LORD will judge between people and settle disputes for nations (cf. Isa 2:4; 11:3–4).<sup>13</sup> Although seen

<sup>8</sup> Link reports that ἐλέγχω is first found in Homer, where it signifies the idea of insulting a person or treating a person with contempt. Plato and Aristotle employ this term to indicate a logical exposition of facts for the purpose of refuting an opponent. Philo uses it to refer to an inner correction which people receive in their consciences (H. G. Link, "Guilt," *NIDNTT* 2:140). See also C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2d ed., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 486.

<sup>9</sup> Although use of the term is quite varied in secular literature, Buchsel states that its use in the NT is more restricted ("ἐλέγχω," *TDNT* 2:474). The LXX translators' understanding of ἐλέγχω was primarily shaped by secular use of the term. NT writers were also influenced by how the word was commonly used in their day. Yet, it seems that they were significantly influenced by how ἐλέγχω was used in the LXX.

<sup>10</sup> "Guilt," *NIDNTT* 2:140, "נָצַח," *HALOT* 2:410, "נָצַח," BDB 406–7. The OT passages mentioned in this section are all places where the Hebrew נָצַח is translated ἐλέγχω in the LXX.

<sup>11</sup> David states that God rebuked kings for Israel's sake (1 Chr 16:21). This seems to indicate that by rebuking the pagan rulers God prevented them from attacking Israel. See Robert A. Payne, "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Conversion," *BSac* 150 (1993) 206.

<sup>12</sup> J. Lust, E. Eynikel, and K. Hauspie, comp., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (2 vols., Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1992–96) 1:144, "ἐλέγχω," *LSJ* 531.

<sup>13</sup> Payne, "Role of the Holy Spirit" 206.

several times in the LXX, the decision-making sense of the term is not found in the NT.

A less common use of ἐλέγχω appears in Job 13:3. Having heard his companions' assessment of his condition, Job declares that he is prepared to argue his case with God. He says that he will defend himself before God's face (13:15). Job foolishly claims that he is able to present convincing evidence and enter into debate with his Creator. The concept of arguing one's own case is not directly connected to ἐλέγχω as it is found in the NT.

Another rare use of ἐλέγχω involves the idea of issuing a formal charge against a person or accusing a person as in a court of law. In Hos 4:4, the Israelites are warned against bringing charges against each other. This general sense of accusing another person of wrongdoing may possibly be seen in a few NT uses of ἐλέγχω, including one with several key similarities to John 16:8.<sup>14</sup>

With this background, it will be helpful to survey the use of ἐλέγχω in the NT. Pyne correctly notes: "For the most part, the use of ἐλέγχω in the New Testament is similar to its use in the Old."<sup>15</sup> However, while the usage is similar, there are several differences between how the word is used in the two testaments.

A few times in the NT, ἐλέγχω is used to communicate the idea of exposing sin.<sup>16</sup> Paul states that believers should not be involved with sinful deeds but rather they should expose them (Eph 5:11, 13). The apostle John writes that those who do evil things hate the light because they do not want their deeds to be exposed (John 3:20). This use of ἐλέγχω to speak of exposing or bringing to light wicked deeds is well attested in extrabiblical literature.<sup>17</sup>

Sometimes the term is used to convey the thought of discipline or punishment. The writer of Hebrews encourages those who are God's children not to spurn the Lord's discipline. God rebukes his children in love, and such discipline is a sign that one is a child of God (Heb 12:5). In a letter to the church of Laodicea, the risen Christ had John record a similar thought. In that letter, John explains that Christ rebukes and disciplines those whom he loves (Rev 3:19). Here ἐλέγχω is used to convey the idea of correction which is meant to bring about a change. This concept of disciplining is comparable to a nuance which ἐλέγχω occasionally bears in the LXX.<sup>18</sup>

Another use of ἐλέγχω includes the concept of expressing strong disapproval of someone's actions or reproving another person for his conduct.<sup>19</sup> Jesus directed his disciples to rebuke other believers privately with the goal of repentance. If private rebuke does not lead to repentance, then the issue

<sup>14</sup> In John 8:46, Jesus asks the Jews if anyone is able to convict him of sin. This use of ἐλέγχω may simply mean to accuse him of sin, but it is more likely that the main idea in this question is whether anyone can present convincing evidence that he has sinned and can call him to repentance.

<sup>15</sup> Pyne, "Role of the Holy Spirit" 207.

<sup>16</sup> The term ἐλέγχω is not used with this meaning in the LXX.

<sup>17</sup> "ἐλέγχω," BDAG 315.

<sup>18</sup> In Job 5:17, Eliphaz admonishes Job with a similar statement about the blessedness of the man who receives God's correction (ἐλέγχω). He exhorts Job not to despise the discipline of the Almighty.

<sup>19</sup> "ἐλέγχω," BDAG 315.

should be brought before the church (Matt 18:15–17). In 1 Tim 5:20, Paul instructs believers to publicly rebuke elders who have sinned, so that others will be warned.<sup>20</sup> This use of ἐλέγχω refers to rebuke which may be private or public; either way it involves reproving a person concerning sin and calling that person to repentance.<sup>21</sup> The emphasis is on expressing strong disapproval of another person's actions.

A fourth meaning of ἐλέγχω in the NT stresses the idea of convicting a person or bringing a person to the point of recognizing wrongdoing.<sup>22</sup> James writes that those who break the law are convicted by the law as lawbreakers (Jas 2:9); that is, they are convicted of their guilt. However, this knowledge of guilt does not necessarily lead to repentance. In Jude 15, the author quotes from the book of Enoch and predicts a day when the Lord will judge the world and convict unbelievers of their ungodliness. As unbelievers face this judgment, they will be convinced of their guilt, but they will not repent. In the NT, ἐλέγχω frequently communicates the thought of convicting a person or bringing a person to the point of recognizing guilt. Büchsel rightly states that in the NT the term generally signifies "to show someone his sin and to summon him to repentance."<sup>23</sup>

The word ἐλέγχω cannot possibly carry all of these nuances in John 16:8. It remains to determine which basic meaning is intended in this context.

Several scholars have suggested that, in John 16:8, ἐλέγχω means to prove the world wrong about something.<sup>24</sup> Proponents of this view claim that the Holy Spirit will show the world that its thinking about sin, righteousness, and judgment is in error. Mathews summarizes this position:

The world would be convinced of its incorrect estimate of sin in that it refused to believe in the person and work of Jesus. The world would be shown to be wrong about its concept of righteousness in that Jesus had been glorified and had gone to the Father. Thereby it was made to see that the crucifixion was the sign of Jesus' vindication, not his condemnation, and that evidence of this lay in his glorification. Finally, the world's concept of judgment would be shown wrong because in reality it was the prince of this world, and not Jesus, who had been condemned.<sup>25</sup>

One advantage of this explanation is that in John 3:20, ἐλέγχω does mean "to expose." Therefore, it seems reasonable to interpret John 16:8–11 to mean

<sup>20</sup> In 1 Timothy 5, presumably private rebuke has taken place before the sin is brought before the church.

<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the clearest historical example of ἐλέγχω signifying a public reproof in the NT is when John the Baptist rebuked Herod Antipas for marrying his brother's wife, Herodias (Luke 3:19).

<sup>22</sup> "ἐλέγχω," BDAG 315.

<sup>23</sup> "ἐλέγχω," TDNT 2.474.

<sup>24</sup> Bultmann argues that it is the "three ideas that are called into question" (Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* [trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971] 562). See also Beasley-Murray, *John* 280–82; B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (reprint ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950) 228; Henry Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament* (reprint ed.; 4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 1.866.

<sup>25</sup> "Spirit-Paraclete in the Testimony of Jesus" 275. Smith suggests: "The world is wrong in each of these respects: about what sin is, about where righteousness lies, and about who is judged" (D. Moody Smith, *John* [Abingdon New Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999] 294).

that the Holy Spirit will expose the world's wrong ideas about sin, righteousness, and judgment.

A variation of this position has been defended by Brown, who argues that this ministry is directed toward the disciples rather than toward the world.<sup>26</sup> He contends that the Paraclete works to prove to the disciples that the world is guilty of sin, the world is wrong about justice, and the world now stands judged because of its condemnation of Jesus.<sup>27</sup>

The main problem with both of these interpretations is found in the fact that John 8:46 offers a much closer parallel to John 16:8 than does John 3:20. In both 8:46 and 16:8, ἐλέγχω is used with the preposition περί, and the noun ἁμαρτίας. In the earlier passage, Jesus asks: τίς ἐξ ὑμῶν ἐλέγχει με περὶ ἁμαρτίας.<sup>28</sup> No one argues that this phrase should be translated, "Who can expose my wrong ideas about sin?"<sup>29</sup> Nor does anyone think Jesus was asking, "Can you show a third party that I am guilty of sin?"<sup>30</sup> A more appropriate translation would be, "Which of you convicts me of sin?" Since these two passages bear considerable structural similarities, this idea should be brought out in John 16:8 as well.

The emphasis in John 16:8 seems to be on showing people their sin and convincing them that they stand guilty before God. This convicting or convincing work involves the Holy Spirit bringing the world to a self-conscious "conviction" of its sin and guiltiness.<sup>31</sup>

2. *Interpreting the ὅτι-clauses.* Verses 9–11 contain three ὅτι-clauses that modify the terms "sin," "righteousness," and "judgment." Much debate exists over the significance of the ὅτι-clauses in this passage. Many scholars argue that all three clauses should be understood in an explanatory sense.<sup>32</sup> Others take all three as causal.<sup>33</sup> And at least one writer attempts to mix the categories by seeing the first and last clauses as explanatory and the middle clause as causal.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Brown, *Gospel According to John* 2.705.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 2.712–14.

<sup>28</sup> Lutkemeyer's claim that ἐλέγχω implies the action of a friend in every instance is inexplicable. The Jews that Jesus addressed in John 8:46 could hardly be described as his friends, and in Jude 15, the Lord's convicting work toward the ungodly is certainly not the action of a friend ("Role of the Paraclete" 221–22).

<sup>29</sup> Carson, "Function of the Paraclete" 550. Burge points out that "ἐλέγχειν περὶ should refer to a genuine object and not simply wrong ideas" (Gary M. Burge, *The Anointed Community: The Holy Spirit in the Johannine Tradition* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987] 209).

<sup>30</sup> Steven Thomas, "The Pneumatology of the Johannine Account of Christ's Farewell Discourse" (Th.M. thesis, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 1992) 105.

<sup>31</sup> Carson, "Function of the Paraclete" 558.

<sup>32</sup> E.g. Bultmann, *John* 563, n. 3; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John* (trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 532, n. 167; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (trans. David Smith and G. A. Kon; 3 vols.; reprint ed.; New York: Crossroad, 1982) 3.129; George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (reprint of 1889 ed.; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974) 187.

<sup>33</sup> E.g. Westcott, *John* 228–29; Barrett, *John* 487–88; Carson, *John* 537.

<sup>34</sup> Swete seems to suggest this option by translating the clauses: "in that they believe not . . . by reason of the fact that I go . . . forasmuch as he has been judged already" (Henry Barclay Swete, *The Last Discourse and Prayer of Our Lord* [London: Macmillan, 1914] 118, n. 1).

If the second and third clauses could be ignored, the first could reasonably be taken as explanatory.<sup>35</sup> However, John's structure is so clearly parallel that the three ὅτι-clauses should be interpreted in the same way. As will be seen below, there are significant difficulties in interpreting all three clauses as explanatory, and most who try to interpret the clauses this way end up shifting the meaning at least slightly.<sup>36</sup>

a. *Concerning sin.* In John 16:8, Christ states that the coming Paraclete will convict the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment. The word translated "sin" is ἁμαρτία. Elsewhere, John defines ἁμαρτία as lawlessness and unrighteousness (1 John 3:4; 5:17). He says that sin is transgressing God's law or falling short of his righteous standard. In John 16, ἁμαρτία occurs without the article and therefore most likely refers to sin as a quality or a state rather than to individual sins.<sup>37</sup> The Spirit convicts the world of its sinful condition, that is, the fact that it stands guilty before God.

In order to maintain parallelism between the clauses, the first ὅτι-clause will be interpreted as causal. Therefore, John is saying that the reason why the Holy Spirit will convict the world of its sin is because the world does not believe in Christ. If the world did believe in Christ, its sin would be forgiven and its guilt removed.

b. *Concerning righteousness.* The second sphere in which the Holy Spirit's convicting ministry is said to operate is identified as δικαιοσύνη. Many commentators understand Jesus to be referring either to his own righteousness,<sup>38</sup> to some objective righteous standard,<sup>39</sup> or to righteousness in a more generic sense.<sup>40</sup> The main problem with each of these interpretations

<sup>35</sup> If the first ὅτι-clause is viewed as explanatory, the phrase οὐ πιστεύουσιν εἰς ἐμὲ should be interpreted as defining ἁμαρτία, signifying that the essence of sin is unbelief.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas, "Pneumatology of the Johannine Account" 106. Hengstenberg's interpretation involves a somewhat vague shift in meaning (E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* [2 vols.; reprint of 1865 ed.; Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1980] 2.281). Pyne's explanation also entails a subtle shift in meaning ("Role of the Holy Spirit" 211).

<sup>37</sup> Brown, *Gospel According to John* 2.705; Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (reprint ed.; NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 502; Stephen Sawkyoung Kim, "The Judgment Function of the Paraclete: An Exegetical Study of John 16:7-11" (Th.M. thesis, Calvin Theological Seminary, 1989) 83. BDAG states that sinfulness or the state of being sinful is "a prominent feature in Johannine thought" ("ἁμαρτία" 51).

<sup>38</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (rev. ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 620; Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on John's Gospel* (reprint of 1886 ed.; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978) 870; J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928) 2.507; John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica* (4 vols.; reprint of 1859 ed.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989) 3.408-9; Schnackenburg, *John* 3.130-31; Kim, "Judgment Function of the Paraclete" 87.

<sup>39</sup> A. Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912) 298; Pyne, "Role of the Holy Spirit" 211.

<sup>40</sup> Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12-21* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman, 2002) 166; Ridderbos, *John* 533; Westcott, *John* 229. Hatch suggests an unusual approach. He proposes that δικαιοσύνη in this passage refers to the fact that believers are justified or acquitted because Christ has gone to the Father to act as their advocate (William H. P. Hatch, "The Meaning of John XVI, 8-11," *HTR* 14 [1921] 104-5). Lindars reflects a similar approach to this term (*John* 500-503).

is that they ignore the grammatical parallelism which John sets up.<sup>41</sup> No one doubts that sin refers to the world's sin, but most commentators are loath to interpret verse 10 as meaning that the Paraclete convicts the world of its righteousness. How can unbelieving people be convicted of their righteousness?

Carson has endeavored to answer this question by interpreting righteousness in an ironic sense. He understands this passage to mean that the Holy Spirit convicts the world of its false righteousness.<sup>42</sup>

Carson offers several arguments in favor of this interpretation. He points out that John uses the word "believe" in an ironic sense (2:23–25; 8:31). John speaks of true belief and false belief. Why could he not be using δικαιοσύνη to indicate false righteousness?<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, John frequently alludes to passages and themes from Isaiah, and in the LXX, Isaiah uses δικαιοσύνη to signify the false righteousness of the people which in God's eyes is as filthy rags (Isa 64:6). In the NT, Paul uses δικαιοσύνη in a negative sense on at least three occasions.<sup>44</sup> In Rom 10:3, Paul states that by seeking to establish their own righteousness, the Jews have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God. They have a righteousness which is not true righteousness. Elsewhere, Paul describes his behavior prior to conversion as involving a kind of man-made righteousness that was built around keeping the law and the regulations of the Pharisees (Phil 3:6–9). And in Titus 3:5, the apostle speaks again of a righteousness that is completely unable to save. Perhaps the most telling use of δικαιοσύνη is found in Matt 5:20 where Jesus warns his followers that unless their righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus admits that the religious leaders may have a certain kind of righteousness, but it is not a righteousness which enables one to be accepted by God.<sup>45</sup>

Similar criticism of the religious activities of the Pharisees can also be seen in John's Gospel. Without using the word δικαιοσύνη, John often berates the self-righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. They are careful to keep the Sabbath, but they show no concern for those who are physically disabled (5:16). They study the Scriptures diligently, but they reject the Messiah foretold in those same Scriptures (5:39). They have the law of Moses, but they want to murder Jesus (7:19). Even those who turn to Christ are afraid to confess their faith because of the Pharisees (12:42–43). John is very quick to point out the false righteousness which the Jews possess. As

<sup>41</sup> *περὶ ἁμαρτίας . . . περὶ δικαιοσύνης . . . περὶ κρίσεως* (vv. 9–11). The arbitrary nature of an interpretation which ignores John's parallelism can be seen in Hendriksen's explanation that the Paraclete convicts "the world with respect to *its own sin* of not believing in Christ, with respect to the *righteousness of Christ*, who by his going to the Father is fully vindicated, and with respect to the *judgment of God* pronounced on the prince of the world" (William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John* [2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953–54] 2.326).

<sup>42</sup> Carson, "Function of the Paraclete" 558–60; *idem*, *John* 537–38; *idem*, *Farewell Discourse* 141–45.

<sup>43</sup> Carson, *Farewell Discourse* 141.

<sup>44</sup> John 16:8–10 is the only place where δικαιοσύνη appears in John's Gospel.

<sup>45</sup> Carson, "Function of the Paraclete" 560.

Carson notes, it is a "small wonder then, that the Holy Spirit must convict the world of *its righteousness*."<sup>46</sup>

The ὅτι-clause in John 16:10 states that the Holy Spirit will convict the world of righteousness because Jesus is going to the Father. Interpreting the clause as causal, Carson sees Jesus telling the disciples that the reason the Holy Spirit will convict the world of righteousness is because he will no longer be among them to do it. Carson observes that throughout his earthly ministry, Christ was continually demonstrating the emptiness of the world's pretensions. While on earth, one of Jesus' roles was to show the world that its efforts at righteousness were vain (3:19–21; 15:22, 24).<sup>47</sup> At one point, Jesus told his disciples that the world hated him because he testified about the world's wickedness (7:7).

Although Carson's interpretation of this clause maintains the parallelism of the passage and seems reasonable, it is probably not the best understanding of Christ's statement. Another interpretation which also recognizes the symmetry of John's account sees the ὅτι-clause as indicating that the Paraclete will convict the world of its false righteousness because Jesus' resurrection and ascension prove that he is righteous and has been accepted by his Father. Christ's ascension to heaven demonstrates that the "righteousness" of the religious leaders who rejected him is worthless. Rather than Christ's physical absence being the reason for the Spirit's ministry of convicting the world about righteousness, Christ's ascension is evidence that those who condemned him were eminently unrighteous. The ascension is therefore a basis for the Spirit's ministry of convicting the world of its false righteousness. Those who reject the one whom the Father accepted cannot be right with God. This interpretation has the advantage of offering a theological reason instead of an essentially locative one.<sup>48</sup>

Verse 10 ends with a dependent clause, καὶ οὐκέτι θεωρεῖτέ με ("and you see me no longer"). These words can be taken as referring either to the cross when Christ was taken from his disciples or to the ascension when Christ finally left them to carry out the work he had given them.<sup>49</sup> Either way, Thomas is probably correct when he writes that this clause "is a parenthetical reminder to the apostles that Jesus' impending absence would necessitate their testimony."<sup>50</sup> The disciples never seemed to grasp the fact that Christ was leaving them until he was taken away to be crucified (John 16:16–18). Jesus took another opportunity to warn them that his departure was soon approaching. He was leaving, and their real work of testifying to the world about him in the power of the Spirit was about to begin.

<sup>46</sup> Carson, *Farewell Discourse* 142.

<sup>47</sup> Carson, *John* 538.

<sup>48</sup> Carson interprets the other two ὅτι-clauses as giving theological grounds for the Holy Spirit's convicting ministry. The interpretation being offered here views all three clauses as giving theological reasons behind the Spirit's convicting work.

<sup>49</sup> Morris, *John* 620.

<sup>50</sup> "Pneumatology of the Johannine Account" 110.

c. *Concerning judgment.* The third issue about which the Paraclete convicts the world is κρίσις. John states that the world will be convicted concerning judgment (16:11). Many writers interpret this as referring to the eschatological condemnation of the world or to the world's current standing before God.<sup>51</sup> Either way, κρίσις is taken as meaning God's judgment of the world. In this view, the Holy Spirit convinces people that they are liable to the judgment of God. Even as Satan, the prince of this world, has been condemned, so they, too, will face the condemnation which their sin deserves.

Another understanding of the passage sees the judgment as referring to the world's judgment about spiritual things. The Spirit convicts the world of its false judgment. This interpretation has been championed principally by Carson.<sup>52</sup> He points out that κρίσις is used elsewhere in John's Gospel for making spiritual decisions, such as when Jesus told the Jews to stop judging by outward appearances and to start practicing right judgment (7:24).<sup>53</sup> Carson holds that the judgment concerning which the Spirit convicts people includes "all false judgment, of which the condemnation of Jesus is the supreme example." He continues, "The world is wrong in its fundamental assessment of all things spiritual, and therefore primarily of its assessment of Jesus and his teaching and work."<sup>54</sup>

Carson's explanation is a legitimate interpretation of John 16:11. However, a different understanding of the verse seems preferable. It appears more likely that Christ is describing the Paraclete's work of convicting the world with regard to its own impending judgment by God. Speaking about his approaching death, Jesus previously declared that the time had come for judgment to be passed on the world and for the prince of this world to be driven out (John 12:31).<sup>55</sup> In John 16:11, the reason given for the Spirit's convicting the world of coming judgment is that the prince of this world has been judged.<sup>56</sup> In the ὅτι-clause, judgment speaks of Satan's condemnation, not his spiritual discernment. Therefore, in the absence of any indication that John intends to use the words in two different ways in the same sentence, it seems best to see judgment in the first half of verse 11 as meaning the world's condemnation by God. On the basis of the fact that the prince of this world was judged at the cross, the Holy Spirit will convince the world that it too stands judged by the cross.

<sup>51</sup> Barrett, *John* 488; Hengstenberg, *Gospel of John* 280; Bultmann, *John* 565; Schnackenburg, *John* 3.131–32; Borchert, *John 12–21* 167; Brown, *Gospel According to John* 2.706; Pyne, "Role of the Holy Spirit" 210–11; Kim, "Judgment Function of the Paraclete" 88; F. Büchsel, "κρίνω," *TDNT* 941.

<sup>52</sup> Carson, "Function of the Paraclete" 562–63; *idem*, *Farewell Discourse* 145–47; *idem*, *John* 538–39. See also Mathews, "Spirit-Paraclete in the Testimony of Jesus" 301–4; Rodney K. Ryle, "The Convicting Ministry of the Holy Spirit" (Th.M. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1984) 69–71; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998) 441.

<sup>53</sup> *John* 538. BDAG gives "express an opinion about" as a possible meaning of κρίνω (p. 567, 2a). The word also seems to refer to making spiritual judgments in John 5:30; 8:15–16.

<sup>54</sup> *Farewell Discourse* 145–46.

<sup>55</sup> In John 3:18, κρίνω clearly refers to the world's condemnation by God.

<sup>56</sup> ὅτι ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ κόσμου τούτου κέκριται.

3. *Theological summary.* In John 16:8–11, Christ describes the Paraclete's ministry of convicting the world. He says that the Spirit convicts the world concerning its sinfulness, because people do not believe in him. If the world believed in Christ, it would not be guilty but rather forgiven. The Holy Spirit also convicts the world of its false righteousness which can never help it find favor with God. Clear proof that the world's righteousness is empty is seen in Christ's ascension to the Father. Jesus' righteousness was accepted by God, and therefore those who reject him are rejecting the only source of true righteousness. Finally, the Paraclete convicts the world regarding its impending judgment by God. If the prince of this world has been condemned, how can the world which follows him hope to escape similar condemnation? Satan's evident doom is a basis for convincing the world that it stands condemned apart from Christ.

## II. THE SPIRIT'S MINISTRY OF CONVICTION

Although John 16:8–11 is the primary passage explaining the Holy Spirit's work of conviction, it is not the only one. At this point it will be helpful to tie together what several other passages indicate about conviction in order to develop a more complete picture of this ministry of the Holy Spirit.

1. *Relationship to believers and unbelievers.* The question may be raised whether conviction is experienced by both believers and unbelievers, or by unbelievers alone. And if the Spirit does convict believers, in what way is this conviction different from that which comes to the world?

In 1 Cor 14:24–25, Paul states that unbelievers who enter the assembly of God's people may be convinced of their own sinfulness and be forced to acknowledge that God is at work among his people. Here it seems like conviction at least lays the groundwork for salvation by pointing out an unbeliever's sinful condition. However, conviction does not always lead to salvation. In Jude 15, people are convicted of their sinfulness, but they are not brought to repentance and faith. They simply are convinced of their ungodliness and of the righteousness of God in judging them for their rebellion against him.

In a certain sense, conviction may be said to be effectual in that the Spirit effectually accomplishes the work of convincing sinners of their guilt and their liability to judgment.<sup>57</sup> In another sense, conviction is not effectual in bringing sinners to repentance and faith, nor is it intended to be.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Trench asserts that in contrast to the word ἐπιτιμᾶν, which often means an ineffectual rebuke, ἐλέγγειν is a much more pregnant word; it is so to rebuke another, with such effectual wielding of . . . truth, as to bring him, if not always to confession, yet at least to a conviction, of his sin" (Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* [reprint of 1880 ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953] 13).

<sup>58</sup> Chafer wrongly equates conviction with the effectual call. He defines conviction as "that aspect of the saving work of God by which He, by the Spirit, exerts an influence upon the unsaved by which they may make an intelligent acceptance of Christ as Savior and by which they are caused to desire the salvation which Christ provides." He therefore limits the Spirit's convicting

Conviction does not impart the ability or the willingness to accept Christ. For this, another work of the Spirit is needed, namely, regeneration (1 Cor 2:14). With regard to unbelievers, conviction is a work of the Holy Spirit which convinces them of their sinfulness, their false righteousness, and their coming judgment. Conviction is necessary to salvation, but by itself, it does not bring an unbeliever to salvation.<sup>59</sup>

John 16:8–11 makes it clear that the Paraclete convicts unbelievers, but other passages indicate that believers may also experience conviction. The writer of Hebrews states that the Lord convicts those who are his children (12:5–6). In fact, such conviction is a mark that one belongs to God. This conviction is a form of sanctifying discipline meant for the believer's good (12:9–11). Furthermore, James writes that sin brings with it a conviction that one has broken God's law (2:9). In this case, the believer is expressly convicted with regard to disobeying God's revealed will.

While the *Holy Spirit* is not specifically said to convict believers of their sin, numerous passages reveal that believers can experience conviction. The best explanation for this is that the indwelling Spirit is the one who convinces believers of their need to seek forgiveness (1 John 1:9).

*2. Relationship to special revelation.* In the first chapter of Romans, Paul declares that all people have a knowledge of God because God has revealed himself to humankind through his creation. General revelation provides some information about the Creator. It reveals to people God's power and creative ability, and it declares that he is the only one worthy of man's worship. However, it does not give people specific information about Christ

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ministry to those "whom God calls, draws, and enlightens" (*Systematic Theology* 3.210). Chafer's view cannot account for the fact that passages such as Jude 15 describe people as being convicted but not converted. Nor is his theory able to explain passages which indicate that believers can be convicted of sin subsequent to their conversion (Matt 18:15; 1 Tim 5:20; Heb 12:5).

<sup>59</sup> Since conviction is necessary to salvation, the Holy Spirit must perform his convicting work in every age in order for people to be converted. Along this line, Ryrie has sometimes been accused of denying that there was a ministry of conviction in the OT. However, what Ryrie actually denies is that the Holy Spirit convicted *the world in general* of sin during OT times. He limits the Spirit's ministry of conviction (along with all his other ministries) to *the nation of Israel*. Ryrie claims that while prior to Pentecost the Spirit may have convicted those connected with Israel, he did not begin convicting people outside of Israel until the NT age (Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* [Wheaton: Victor, 1986] 348–49). By limiting conviction to Israel, Ryrie has made an overstatement which the OT will not support. Clearly, many people prior to Abraham experienced the ministry of conviction, and apparently a few individuals outside of Israel were saved. Instead of seeing the Spirit's work of conviction as directly connected to a particular nation, it should be viewed as limited to those who had exposure to special revelation.

On the other hand, Beasley directly states that "conviction was not performed by the Holy Spirit in the OT but began on the day of Pentecost." He goes on to explain that conviction is only needed during the present dispensation "because of the means of salvation during this age of grace" (James Beasley, "The Doctrine of Conviction" [Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1950] 14). Beasley appears to overlook the fact that individuals in every age must recognize their own sinfulness in order to be saved. If conviction is essential to genuine conversion, Beasley's statement must be incorrect.

or salvation. General revelation is available to all people, but it does not provide enough information to convict the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment.

God has given every person a conscience as part of the image of God in man (Rom 2:14–15).<sup>60</sup> The conscience operates in a purely mechanical manner.<sup>61</sup> It does not involve a distinct ministry of the Holy Spirit. A conscience may be educated by special revelation or weakened by faulty information. It may be pragmatically molded by social custom and civil law, or it may be seared as a result of habitual disregard (1 Tim 4:2; Titus 1:15). People may feel guilty when they are rebuked by their conscience, but such guilt is a response somewhat like that of the tactile nerves when they cause a body to recoil from pain. The human conscience keeps people from progressing in sin as readily as they would if they never experienced guilt, but it should not be confused with the Holy Spirit's work of conviction.

Conviction is a special work of the Holy Spirit which is always performed in connection with special revelation. Conviction involves convincing sinners of things which could not be known apart from special revelation.<sup>62</sup> Therefore during the current age conviction may only be experienced by those who have some contact with the Word of God.

The Spirit may work directly to convict people through the Word of God (Jas 2:9), but he often employs believers to communicate truths which he then uses to convict unbelievers. In Acts 18:28, Luke records how Apollos was used by God to refute the Jews by proving from the OT that Jesus was the Christ. As Apollos declared truths about Christ, the special revelation which he communicated was used by the Holy Spirit to convict his listeners. Regardless of whether conviction is mediated through believers or performed more directly by the Holy Spirit, it always involves special revelation being used by the Spirit to convince a person of his sin.

3. *Relationship to grace.* When discussing the relationship of conviction to grace, it is very important to define what one means by terms related to grace. If common grace is understood to be that which is given to all people universally and special grace that which is given individually, then conviction is an aspect of special grace. This is so because conviction does not come to every person without exception. Conviction is only experienced when the Holy Spirit convinces an individual of his guilt by means of the Word of God.

<sup>60</sup> For a helpful discussion of the relationship between conscience and the image of God, see Juan M. Moreno, "A Biblical Theology of Conscience" (Th.M. thesis, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997) 25–36.

<sup>61</sup> Léon-Dufour correctly describes the conscience as an "intuitive faculty" (Xavier Léon-Dufour, "Conscience," *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* 90). Congdon points out that "if conscience were the divine voice within, God would be accounted fallible, for certainly almost every man's conscience works differently from every other's" (Roger Douglass Congdon, "The Doctrine of Conscience," *BSac* 103 [1946] 69–70).

<sup>62</sup> For example, people cannot know about their own impending judgment except as God has revealed it.

If common grace is defined as grace which does not result in salvation and special grace as that which does lead to salvation, then conviction is in some cases related to common grace and in others to special grace. When a person is convicted of his sin but is never saved, such conviction would be a benefit of common grace. However, when a person is convicted of his sin and then ultimately brought to faith in Christ, such conviction would seem to be a part of special grace.

A third option is to view common grace as that which is available to believers and unbelievers indiscriminately. This does not mean that every aspect of common grace is experienced by every person, but rather that common grace is not confined to the elect.<sup>63</sup> Special grace is then understood as that which is given to believers exclusively. According to these definitions, conviction is an aspect of common grace, for it is given to both the elect and the non-elect.<sup>64</sup>

This last explanation seems to best account for the fact that the benefits of common grace are not distributed equally nor are some aspects of common grace experienced universally.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, conviction should be viewed as a benefit of common grace. The Holy Spirit graciously convicts the non-elect to keep them from fully expressing their depravity. He convicts elect unbelievers in preparation for his work of special grace. And God convicts believers in order to bring them to repentance and to further their sanctification.

### III. CONCLUSION

As has been seen from John 16:8–11, conviction is a ministry of the Holy Spirit in which he convinces individuals of their sinfulness, their false righteousness, and their impending condemnation. According to this passage, the Spirit convicts the world of sin because people do not believe in Christ. Unbelievers are convicted of their false righteousness because in ascending to heaven Jesus demonstrated that he is the only source of true righteousness. Apart from his righteousness, one cannot be accepted by God. And the Spirit convicts the world that it will face the judgment of God because the prince of this world has been condemned.

<sup>63</sup> The point of Christ's words in Matt 5:45 is that God gives the sun and rain to both believers and unbelievers without distinction.

<sup>64</sup> Ryrie states that the doctrine of conviction "probably belongs under common grace since [the Holy Spirit's] work of conviction does not affect all people and is not always efficacious unto salvation. Some who are 'convicted' reject the gospel; others accept it" (Charles C. Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit* [rev. and exp. ed.; Chicago: Moody Press, 1997] 81). It should be noted that Ryrie's statement is only partially correct. Conviction itself is never efficacious unto salvation. It is necessary to salvation, but it in no way brings about salvation. Pyne is more accurate when he writes: "The Holy Spirit's work of reproof functions along with the general call of the gospel as a ministry of common grace. However, it is insufficient of itself to bring someone to conversion" ("Role of the Holy Spirit" 218).

<sup>65</sup> If one recognizes that good health, a peaceful society, and freedom to worship as one chooses are all benefits of common grace, it becomes apparent that many people do not enjoy certain aspects of common grace.

As a manifestation of common grace, conviction does not necessarily lead sinners to salvation. However, it is effectual in bringing sinners to a knowledge of their condition before God. Conviction occurs when the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to show a sinner his guilt. This knowledge of sin is a necessary prerequisite to true repentance.

The Holy Spirit also uses the Word of God to convict believers of their sin. This conviction may or may not be mediated through other believers, but it should always lead to repentance as part of the continuing process of sanctification.