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1997

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#### Recommended Citation

Blaney, Joseph R. and Benoit, William L., "The Persuasive Defense of Jesus in the Gospel According to John" (1997). *Faculty Publications - Communications*. 10.

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## The Persuasive Defense of Jesus in the Gospel According to John

Joseph R. Blaney

William L. Benoit

### Abstract

*Image restoration strategies are reviewed and then applied to Jesus' discourse in the Gospel according to St. John. Brief reviews of verbal attacks on Jesus are given, followed by descriptions of the defense strategies he employed to deal with the accusations. Jesus primarily engaged in denial and transcendence. Some charges were so serious that they required unequivocal denial. However, it should not be surprising that Jesus also used transcendence given his desire to advance a more spiritual order of religious practice.*

Few historical figures have had the cultural impact of Jesus Christ. He has been the subject of study of some of the world's greatest scholars for nearly two millennia. Some believe that he was simply a radical Jewish rabbi who was executed for blasphemous remarks about his divinity (Crossan, 1993). Others (Lewis, 1943) believe that he was divine, both man and God, sent to redeem the world. Regardless of one's interpretation of who Jesus was, almost two billion people throughout the world call themselves Christians, followers of Jesus Christ (*World Almanac*, 1995).

It is no wonder, then, that so many people have been interested in investigating who he was, what he preached, and how his legacy is relevant today. This paper will examine the way he rhetorically defended himself throughout John's Gospel in the face of myriad criticism. We begin with an overview of persuasive defense theories, including Benoit's (1995) theory of image restoration (our chosen method of analysis). From there we provide a description of the attacks on Jesus, and then proceed to analyze his defense strategies. Finally, we evaluate the effectiveness of those strategies.

### Image Restoration Theory

Benoit (1995) combines several previous (Burke, 1970; Rosenfield, 1968; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Ware & Linkugel, 1973) typologies to develop his image restoration theory. There are five major categories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Additionally, three of these categories have subcategories.

This method has been applied to study image repair strategies during corporate crises (Benoit, 1995a; Benoit, 1995b; Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Brinson & Benoit, 1996) political difficulties (Benoit, 1995a; Benoit, Gullifor, & Panici, 1991) as well as personal crises of celebrities (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994). Readers wanting a more detailed explication of the

method should consult these studies.

With our method in mind, we now turn to an explanation of the accusations made against Jesus Christ. After all, he was the son of a modest carpenter, which could have easily made some of his claims appear vainglorious. Then, we apply our method to Jesus' persuasive defense strategies.

### Accusations Toward Jesus

Ryan (1982) discussed image restoration as a speech set. In other words, one must consider the nature and extent of the accusations (*kategoria*) in order to properly evaluate the defense (*apologia*) against such attacks.

The accusations under consideration come from various parties as noted in the Gospel according to St. John. They include the following charges:

- 1) the disciples' charge that Jesus was too rigid in his religious observances;
- 2) the Pharisees' accusations that Jesus's testimony about himself was invalid because he acted as his own witness;
- 3) a crowd of fellow Jews asserting that he violated the law by healing a crippled man on the Sabbath;
- 4) Jewish and Roman officials' accusations that he disrespected civil authorities;
- 5) a group of skeptical Jews claiming that he was possessed by a demon; and
- 6) angry crowds in Jerusalem charging that he blasphemously claimed to be the Son of God (which we believe is obviously the most serious attack).

Of course, more attacks could be compiled from the other three Gospels. However, examining John's Gospel is a first step in discovering Jesus' image repair strategies. We now examine the defense strategies appearing in his discourse in response to each of the individual attacks which occur throughout John's Gospel.

### Jesus Responds to Attacks

*Rigidity.* Ironically, the first attack examined does not come from the Pharisees or the Romans, but from his own disciples. Jesus had instructed them not to concern themselves with the needs of the physical world. Furthermore, they were ordered to feed the world with the "bread of life," which was the good news of Jesus himself. This annoyed the followers to the extent that they rejected his teachings as rigid. In response Christ said, "Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before? The spirit gives life. The flesh counts for nothing" (John 6: 61-63). This statement is clearly transcendent insofar as it contrasts two understandings of nourishment, physical and spiritual, and privileges the latter. The disciples clearly have a materialistic understanding of good works, whereas Jesus asserts that the only important nourishment is not about the body, but the soul. Thus, we see Jesus employing transcendence.

*Self-Testimony.* The next defense examined is Jesus' response to accusations that his testimonies about himself are suspect because he acts as his own witness. In other words, there is corroboration that his claims about himself are true. Jesus responded:

Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. You judge by human standards; but I judge no one. But if I do judge, my decisions are right because I am not alone. I stand with the Father who sent me (John 8: 14-16).

In this passage, he does not deny the lack of corroboration. Instead, Jesus transcends again by saying that he is not at all alone, since God the Father is with him in his work. In other words, he does not need the witness of man because he has the witness of God—and surely God's word ought to be enough for them.

*Violating the Sabbath.* In the third attack, Jesus responds to criticisms that he healed a crippled man on the Sabbath, which was forbidden since no labor of any type was permitted on that day. He was incredulous:

I did one miracle and you are all astonished. Yet because Moses gave you circumcision, you circumcise a child on the Sabbath. Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath? Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgement (John 7: 21-24).

The analogical argument exhibits transcendence by insisting that the stricture of keeping the Sabbath holy does not prohibit all actions. Specifically, religious acts-like circumcision and arguably like Jesus' miracles-are permitted. Respecting the Sabbath, Jesus implies, should be more spiritual than physical. Once again, the spiritual transcends the physical.

We should note that these first three examples all demonstrate Jesus' use of transcendence in his defense. It should not be surprising to see transcendence in Jesus' discourse. After all, people who claim to be the children of God are likely to claim having knowledge that absolves them from the ordinary standards of the world. By saying that God witnessed to his testimony, for instance, he could argue that men who have no special standing with God should not attack him.

Jesus also employs the strategy of minimization in defending miracles on the Sabbath. When he says, "I did one miracle and you are all astonished" (John 7: 21) he acknowledges that he did violate Sabbatical norms. However, his use of the quantifier (one) serves to underscore that his violation was minimum and not something that occurred frequently.

*Disrespecting Authority.* Standing before Pontius Pilate, Jesus ultimately refused to answer any more questions about who he was. Pilate chastised this disobedience, saying "Do you refuse to speak to me? Don't you realize that I have the power either to free you or to crucify you" (John 19: 10)? At this point Jesus wanted to make it perfectly clear that his submission to this trial was prompted by the Father and not the power of a civilian governor. He replied, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore, the one who handed me over to you is guilty of the greater sin" (John 19: 11). In this instance, Jesus employs transcendence. He makes the point that Pilate (and men in general) have no power over him. Rather, his predicament is the result of doing his Father's will. The response comes in reply to the attack that Jesus acts foolishly by not submitting to questions from a man who has the power to kill him. Jesus transcends the charge that he is making such a mistake, because only the Father would have such power over him.

In another instance of supposed disrespect for authority, Jesus was accused of talking back to a high priest. He criticized the high priest for questioning him in private, saying that he had always preached in synagogues, temples and other private places. As such, his former statements were a matter of public knowledge. After a guard slapped him for

scolding the high priest, Jesus retorted "If I said something wrong, testify to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me" (John 18: 23)? This statement is an example of simple denial, where one claims to have doing nothing wrong. In fact, all Jesus did was point out that all of his preaching had been in public, and that there was no need to drag him in for questioning. Incidentally, when Jesus suggested that the high priest struck him for speaking the truth, it functioned as an attack on his accuser.

*Demonic Possession.* Jesus employed simple denial a second time when he was accused of being possessed by a demon. In an exchange with some skeptical Jews, they charged that Jesus's miraculous powers were the result of demonic possession. Jesus asserted, "I am not possessed by a demon" (John 8: 49). This is clearly an example of simple denial.

*Blasphemy.* The most serious charges against Jesus (indeed, the ones that ultimately lead to his execution) were that he made blasphemous remarks. In all, there are four such accusations in John's Gospel.

In the first instance, Jesus responds to complaints that he should not claim to be God's son since most of these people knew him as the son of Joseph the carpenter. When Jesus tells them to "stop grumbling among yourselves" (John 6: 43), he is implying that these people are focusing on trivial matters and making small complaints that ignore what is really important. This functions as an instance of attacking the accuser.

Jesus responds with such attacks again when the crowds in Jerusalem become upset over his claim that death was conquered through him. Because even Abraham and the prophets died, the Jews interpreted this as Jesus asserting his divinity, which infuriated them. He retorted, "I know him [God]. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and keep his word" (John 8: 55). This is an obvious example of attacking the accuser. Jesus attempts to impugn the character of his accusers by calling them liars. Simultaneously, if the accuser can be successfully labeled a liar, charges against the rhetor who is defending can be discredited.

It should be noted that Jesus makes many attacks in the Gospel, such as those against the hypocrites who pray in public places and the money-changers in the temple. However, those attacks are not made as responses to others' attacks, and so they are not analyzed in this study.

In other defense against blasphemy, Jesus is taken to task for making the claim that death has no power over him. When asked how he could make such a pompous claim, he countered, "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me" (John 8: 54). Pressed with why he makes such a bold claim, he defers to God. In effect, he denies glorifying himself, saying that it is God the Father who glorifies him. As such, here Jesus is engaging in simple denial since he asserts that no self-glorification is even taking place.

Finally, when Jesus proclaims, "I and the Father are one" (John 10: 30), he is again accused of blasphemy. Again his strategy is simple denial:

Is it not written in your law, "I have said you are gods?" If he called them gods, to whom the word of god came—and the scripture cannot be broken—what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, "I am God's son?" Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I in the Father (John 10: 34-38).

In this passage, Jesus denies committing blasphemy. He concedes that an ordinary man claiming to be God would be guilty of blasphemy. However, he reminds the crowd (with stones in their hands) that God promised to send a man in his name. Further, he implores them to go beyond considering his man-like form and notice that he performed miracles just as the Father had. The miracles alone, he argued, proved that he and the Father were indeed one. Thus, he was not a mere man claiming to be God and so he was not committing blasphemy.

### Evaluation

With this analysis of Jesus' discourse from the Gospel according to John in hand, we can turn to an evaluation of it. The strategies we found in Jesus' utterances were generally appropriate. The two main strategies employed were denial and transcendence.

There are occasions where Jesus' use of simple denial is not only appropriate, but necessary. To be sure, some attacks can only be refuted effectively with a strong denial. For instance, he had to deny emphatically that he was possessed by a demon. If he had not, his credibility as a rabbi (indeed, as the Messiah) would have been destroyed immediately. This was an especially troublesome accusation because, if not refuted, demonic possession could explain his performance of miracles and thusly undermine the corroboration of his divinity provided by those miracles. Therefore, it is not only appropriate, but in fact, necessary for Jesus to be unequivocal in denying the accusations of demonic possession.

Likewise, blasphemy was a charge that Jesus had to deny outright. He needed to maintain that he was truly the Son of God, so it was imperative to deny accusations of blasphemy. Thus, as his fellow Jews prepared to pelt him with stones, Jesus claimed he was no ordinary man, but the Son of God sent to earth. This allowed him to assert that no blasphemy took place. Clearly, denial of blasphemy charges was a vital cornerstone of Jesus' defense.

There are other occasions where one cannot deny having said or done something, yet the accusation still needs to be addressed. Accordingly Jesus' reliance on the transcendence strategy was appropriate. When one speaks of heavenly things as Jesus did there is an expectation that things of this world will be contrasted with those of a better world. Such is the case when Jesus speaks of spiritual nourishment rather than physical, the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law, and the authority of the Father rather than the authority of man. So, transcendence, the second major component of Jesus' defense, is an appropriate strategy for someone claiming to be the Son of God.

Jesus also twice defends himself from blasphemy charges by attacking the accusers. By doing so, he could effectively shift any focus of impropriety to the people who could potentially harm him or his reputation. It is also consistent with his other defenses (e.g., denial).

Finally the one instance of minimization is somewhat humorous. Recall that when Jesus was accused of violating the Sabbath by healing a cripple, he minimized the event by saying that it was merely *one* miracle (as opposed to several). Those of us who have yet to perform miracles might find this amusing. Yet, Jesus did effectively minimize the "offense" by pointing to its infrequency of occurring only once.

## Discussion

One could argue that, in the short term, it appears that Jesus' defense was ineffective because he was crucified. That view is, in our opinion, shortsighted. That point of view assumes that Jesus' primary audience was his accusers, and his primary purpose to avoid crucifixion. We reject this assumption, believing that his discourse functions primarily for a broader, historic audience, and that it succeeded in answering potential questions that could have left his ministry stillborn. On the contrary, Jesus' discourse was able to answer those accusations for the hundreds of millions who accept Jesus as the Son of God.

This analysis shows that religious figures can use image repair strategies to defend themselves and their religious beliefs from even the most serious accusations (demonic possession; blasphemy). At times, rhetors face charges that must be denied; other accusations may be more amenable to other strategies.

Although we have only analyzed a limited set of discourse, we believe transcendence can be an especially apt strategy for those who defend theological doctrines. The ideas that earthly concerns are ephemeral, that the body is less important than the soul, that there are higher purposes, or that a wonderful reward awaits us in the afterlife are all clear instances of transcendence. Further rhetorical research of religious communicators is in order, keeping in mind the possibility that transcendence might permeate such communication by its very nature.

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