

36). Interpreting Jesus' ministry means relating it to the cross and resurrection. The Messiah's victory does not come by avoiding death but by enduring and overcoming it. Conversely, Jesus' death and resurrection are to be understood in light of the preceding ministry. If giving life was central in his acts of healing, feeding people, and raising the dead, then this helps readers see that giving life is what he does through his death and resurrection. Working with the Gospel as a whole will also shape the way we consider the identity of God, the human condition, the work of the Spirit, and the life of faith.

CHAPTER 2

God

The question, "How do people know God?" is at the heart of John's Gospel. The prologue declares that all things came into being through God's Word (1:1-3), which means that the world and its people were made by God for relationship with him. God loves the world and sends his Son to it, yet God remains unseen (1:18; 3:16). He is "from above," while human beings are "from below," and people lack the capacity to peer behind heaven's veil for an unmediated glimpse of God (8:23). Throughout John's Gospel, God's purposes drive the story. Jesus says that he has come to do the will of his Father. He speaks the words God told him to speak and does the works God gave him to do (5:30; 6:38; 12:49). Yet God remains hidden, his presence elusive. In the end even Jesus' followers grow restive and say, "Show us the Father" for then "we will be satisfied" (14:8).¹

It would perhaps be easier to begin our work with Jesus, who speaks words that can be heard and does actions that can be seen. He touches the sick with hands that can be felt and feeds the crowd with bread that can be tasted. Yet tracing the ministry of Jesus soon brings the issue back to God. The Gospel insists that the point of Jesus' coming is to make the unseen God known (1:18). At the end of his public ministry Jesus says, "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me" (12:44-45). The story climaxes when Thomas encounters the crucified and risen Jesus and confesses, "My Lord and my God" (20:28). The Gospel was written in order that readers might make a similar confession. In the crucified and risen Jesus, they are called to see the face of God. John writes about God for an interreligious world. He does not offer

theoretical arguments for God's existence, since everyone in the story assumes that there is a God of some sort. The problem is that their ideas about God conflict. There are Jews who worship at the temple in Jerusalem and Samaritans who insist that God should be worshipped on a mountain to the north, in Samaria. They agree *that* God should be worshipped, but disagree about how this should be done (4:20). Then there are the Greeks, who on occasion may worship in Jerusalem, but who are known for venerating many different deities at sanctuaries scattered throughout the ancient world (7:35; 12:20). Pilate the Roman governor has his own religious sensibilities. While interrogating Jesus, Pilate is told that his prisoner has been making himself into the Son of God, and the idea that there might be divine involvement in the case makes Pilate afraid. The issue is delicate because Pilate's career depends on good relations with the emperor, who also claims the title "son of god" (19:7-8). John must disclose who God is in the context of competing truth claims.

Questions about God belong to the fabric of human life. If all things have been created by God, then all people are related to God as his creatures. The issue is not *whether* people will relate to God — that is a given — it is whether this relationship will be positive or negative, faith or unfaith. And John's Gospel assumes that the way people understand and relate to God affects their relationships with other people and the world around them. The way they live and work is shaped by the relationships they consider most important. So who is God, according to John's Gospel? And how is God known?

God and the Word

The Gospel begins with God's Word, his act of communicating. The opening lines read, "In the beginning was the Word (*logos*), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . all things came into being through him" (1:1-3). The Greek term *logos* has a wide range of meanings. It resonates with Jewish traditions about the power and wisdom of God as well as with philosophical teachings concerning the energy that shapes the universe.² But the term is often used for the spoken "word" (e.g., 2:22; 4:37; 5:24). A word is a form of address, a means of engagement. To say, "In the beginning was the Word" is to say that in the beginning is God's act of communication. Without communication God remains unknown and

unknown. For the Gospel to say anything about God means that God must first disclose something of himself.

John assumes that God communicates in three ways. First, God is known through *Israel's Scriptures*. The Gospel does not argue this point but presupposes it.³ The opening lines of the prologue, which were quoted above, use the term "god" or *theos* without further explanation. This could conceivably be problematic, since the same term was used for the deities of various religious traditions in the ancient world, and one might wonder which god John refers to. Yet the prologue's language makes clear that John speaks of the God known in Israel's Scriptures, who is the Creator. The first line of the Scriptures reads, "In the beginning . . . God said" (Gen. 1:1-3). John echoes this by saying, "In the beginning was the Word," who "was with God" and who "was God" (John 1:1). John presupposes that there is only one true God, who has already made himself known through the law and the prophetic writings (5:44; 17:3). When the Gospel speaks of "god" in the singular, it refers to the God of Israel's tradition.

Since the Scriptures already speak of God, much of what the Gospel says about God may seem commonplace. John refers to the creative power of God's Word (1:1-3); he assumes that God has the power to give life and to raise the dead (5:21); and he identifies God as the one with authority to judge all people (5:45). None of this is new information for those who are familiar with the Old Testament. Yet for the Fourth Evangelist, the question of knowing God is not primarily a matter of receiving additional pieces of information. The Gospel depicts people who affirm that what the Scriptures say about God is true, but whose words and actions show that they do not truly "know" God from John's perspective (8:54-55). For John, "knowing" is a relational term. It involves trusting God and showing faithfulness to him. And to bring about such relationships, John says that God makes himself known in another way.

This second form of communication takes place through *Jesus of Nazareth*. In Jesus, God's Word comes to people as an embodied human being. This is the heart of the Gospel. There are many human beings who say things *about* God, but in Jesus the Word comes *from* God in human form. God speaks to the world through the words Jesus utters, the actions he performs, and the death that he dies. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, people not only receive information about God, but are granted an encounter with God. And the prologue prepares readers to see the whole story of Jesus as God's act of communicating through his embodied Word.

The prologue defines the relationship of God to his Word as follows: "the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1b). This deceptively simple statement includes two seemingly incompatible thoughts. People normally speak of someone's identity by saying that the person "is." Or else they refer to a relationship by saying that the person "is with" someone else. But in the world of God both are true at the same time. The Word not only is "with" God but "is" God.⁴ This paradoxical statement presses readers to think through the way a speaker relates to a word. In ordinary experience, people know that a word can be differentiated from the one who speaks it and that a person who utters a word has an existence outside of that word. Yet there is a deeper connection. To hear a person's word is to hear the person. When a person's word effects something, the person effects something. This is what the prologue is driving at. The Word is differentiated from God and yet is identified with God. Where the Word addresses the world, God addresses the world.

God communicates with the world in order to bring about relationship. This is the reason he sends the Word. The pattern has some analogies at the human level. People generally understand that communication is essential for relationships. Where there is no communication people have no means of coming to know, love, and trust someone else. Where there is miscommunication, relationships suffer. Therefore, people foster relationships by the words they speak and the actions they do for others. The same is true of God and human beings. The God who made all things sends his Word in order that people might know him, receive him, and believe in him (1:10-12). To know and believe the Word is to trust the God who sends it.

The challenge is that God must communicate in a form that can be received by human beings. God might choose to speak in the mysterious language of heaven, but his message would not mean anything to the people who know only the dialects of earth. At one point in the narrative, God does speak directly from heaven, proclaiming his glory, yet the bystanders take it to be the rumbling of thunder or the unintelligible speech of an angel (12:28-29). Communication requires that the sender find a way of connecting with the intended recipients. On the human level, a person might speak perfectly clear English, but the words will mean nothing to someone who understands only a dialect from Indonesia. For communication to take place, the speaker must find an alternative way to convey meaning, such as making visible gestures with the hands and using facial expres-

sions. According to John's Gospel, this is what God does. He makes his Word visible as well as audible.

God addresses human beings through the Word that becomes flesh in Jesus of Nazareth (1:1, 14). God sends his Word in the flesh because flesh is what all people share. The flesh is not strange but familiar. This enables God to speak to human beings in genuinely human form. God can do this because he is the one who created flesh in the first place. The Gospel recognizes that human flesh is weak and mortal, yet it is not inherently evil. God made the flesh and can use it as a vehicle for his Word.

But here is the complicating factor. For communication to take place, people must receive what is essentially different (the Word of God) in what is essentially the same as themselves (the flesh). In Jesus, people meet someone who is as human as they are, yet he claims to have come from God and to address them with God's own authority. This provokes a new issue. In the eyes of many people, Jesus seems too human to have come from God. Since they see that Jesus is a living breathing person, they cannot believe that he is from God in any unique way. They insist that he is a human being, who is wrongfully trying to elevate himself to the status of God. They reject the idea that he has come down from God to carry out the work of God in human form. This irony is central to John's Gospel: God reaches across the barrier that separates him from human beings by sending his Word in human form; yet this human form becomes a new barrier, since many people see only the human Jesus and cannot comprehend that he is from God (1:10-11).⁵

The Gospel assumes that God has spoken in Scripture and in Jesus, yet recognizes that both forms of communication can be misunderstood. There are some people in the Gospel who recognize that what Jesus says and does fits well with what God has declared in the law and the prophets (1:45; 5:37-39), but others argue the reverse. They insist that the Scriptures discredit Jesus, since his Galilean origins do not fit the biblical paradigm for a Messiah and his practice of healing on the Sabbath seems to violate God's law (7:41-42; 9:16). This is a major point of conflict in the narrative. Jesus' opponents derive from the Scriptures an understanding of God that sets them against the Word made flesh (8:54-55). Therefore, as we explore the debates in the Gospel, we find that the evangelist will seek to show that the Scriptures bear witness to the truth of God in Jesus, and that Jesus discloses the truth of God in Scripture.

Third, God continues to communicate through the *Holy Spirit* after the

ministry of Jesus has ended. The Gospel says that the Spirit comes from the Father and is given to the disciples by the risen Jesus (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). The Spirit is not an independent witness to God, but continues to disclose the meaning of Jesus' words and deeds after the conclusion of his incarnation. God communicated through the Word made flesh, and the Spirit continues to teach and remind people about the significance of what Jesus said (14:26). The Spirit does not bring new revelation but conveys the meaning of what God revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (see pp. 152-57). In this process the community of faith continues to discern how Jesus' witness to God is related to what was previously included in the Scriptures. For the Fourth Evangelist, God is known through all three forms of communication noted here. The Gospel focuses on what God communicates through the Word made flesh and understands this in light of the Scriptures and the ongoing witness of God's Spirit.

Creator and Giver of Life

Basic to John's theology is that God has created all things through his Word. Referring to God's Word the prologue says, "all things came into being through him" (1:3a). This too echoes the biblical creation story. The main verb is *egeneto*, which is used repeatedly in the Greek translation of Genesis: "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was (*egeneto*) light"; "God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters' . . . and it was so (*egeneto*)" (Gen. 1:3, 6-7). Throughout the biblical account of creation, God speaks and things happen; his Word forms the world.

John uses this biblical language to establish a pattern of relationships between God and others. God and his Word are simply present at the beginning. Their existence is taken for granted. By way of contrast, the world comes into being. It is not self-generated or ultimate. It owes its existence to the God who called it into being. The prologue does not speculate about what God might have been doing before creation — though Jesus will later disclose that God's glory and love existed before the world was ever made (John 17:5, 24). Instead, the prologue helps define God's relationship to the world. God is the Creator; the world is created. The world may claim independence, but this is not the case. Its existence depends upon the Word of God.

Emphasizing the scope of creation, the prologue says that without

God's Word "not one thing came into being" (1:3b). This is important given John's sharp distinctions between what is above and below, between heaven and earth (3:12, 31). Readers can get the impression that the earth is inherently evil, unlike the celestial sphere above. John contrasts flesh and Spirit, what is of this world and what is not of this world (3:6; 8:23). Readers may infer that the flesh and the world are intrinsically bad, while the Spirit and the otherworldly realm are good. Yet this is not the view of the Gospel writer.

God is the Creator of all things in heaven and on earth. The world and the flesh are limited and perishable, yet they belong to God's creation and are not essentially evil. The Word can become flesh because the flesh itself is fashioned by God. The created order does not, in itself, yield any sure knowledge of God. Yet upon entering the world, Jesus calls upon things that can be seen and heard and tasted to bear witness to the unseen God who sent him. Water jars filled with wine, bread made from barley, shafts of light striking the eye of a blind man — all become vehicles for revelation. When teaching, Jesus invokes images of flowing water, a shepherd and sheep, a vine and a vine-dresser, so that aspects of the creation are used in witness to the Creator and his gifts.

Thus far the prologue has said that the Word of God has given things existence. Now it says that in God's Word was "*life*," which is something more (1:4). Life is pictured as a light for human beings, and it is central to John's understanding of God's identity and purposes. God "has life in himself," which means that his life is not derived from any other source (5:26). God has life and God gives life. This gives readers a basic sense of who God is.⁶ Human beings, in contrast, do not have life in themselves. If they are to live they must receive life from God. This means that in John's Gospel life is understood relationally. To have life is to relate to the God who is the source of all life.

Life has multiple dimensions in John's Gospel. One of these is physical. Those who are alive physically have hearts that beat and lungs that breathe. Since God's Word is the source of physical life, this is an essential feature of the ministry of Jesus, the incarnate Word. He restores the health of a boy dying of a fever, so that the child "lives" (4:50-51). Giving bread to a hungry crowd, enabling a paralyzed man to walk, giving a blind man his sight, and calling Lazarus out of the tomb — all of these reveal the power of the life-giving God.

There is also a dimension to life that goes beyond the physical. To have

true life is to know and trust God and his Word. The prologue develops this idea by tracing the coming of the Word into the world. Those who have life "know" God through his Word (1:10). This is a positive form of relationship. Knowing can simply mean that someone has correctly absorbed information, but knowing God is more like knowing a person. It involves a recognition of identity, a discerning of the truth about someone. Knowing has a cognitive dimension, yet it is not limited to this. To know God through his Word is to "receive" him, as one welcomes a person into one's home (1:11). It is to "believe" in the Word, which means trusting God himself (1:12).

The Gospel recognizes that there may be disjunction between the different facets of life. Physically, all people receive life from God, yet that does not mean that everyone has the life that comes through faith. People who can breathe and move have the capacity to turn away from their Maker. They can reject the Word of God that brought them into being and refuse to believe in him (1:10-11). They can receive the gifts of food and healing that sustain the body, while repudiating the giver (5:14-16; 6:26-36). All people are related to God as his creatures, yet faith is life-giving in a way that alienation from God is not. People can be alive physically and yet dying relationally.

The Gospel also recognizes that true life begins while the heart beats and the lungs breathe, yet it has a future that extends beyond physical death. Therefore, true life is often identified as "eternal life" (e.g., 3:15; 4:14; 5:24). Eternal life begins now, in faith, and it continues beyond death through the promise of resurrection. Life in the present can be called "eternal," as faith brings people into relationship with the eternal God. People are not inherently immortal, and even those who believe will die. Yet the relationship with God is not terminated by death. God does not abandon believers but gives them a future through resurrection (see pp. 130-32, 179-82).

Human beings are created with a need for life, and they pursue what they think will bring it. So if life comes from God, as the Gospel says it does, then questions about life are ultimately questions about God. This inherent need for life makes the matter of God inescapable. The issue is not whether people will seek life — that is a given — the issue is where their pursuit of life will take them and how this relates to what God is doing.⁷ The human side of the issue will be the focus of our next chapter. Here we focus on God's actions and what they reveal about his identity.

The Sender

God's will for relationship is reflected in the theme of "sending" (*apostellō, pempō*). According to the Fourth Gospel, God sends John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit into the world to carry out his purposes. Sending is a form of engagement. Through his emissaries, God engages the world he has made. In the climactic scenes following Jesus' resurrection, the disciples are also "sent" into the world and empowered by the Spirit (20:21-22). The pattern of sending ultimately gives shape to Christian discipleship. We will find that as God sends others, he goes with them. God does not send others into the world in order that he might remain comfortably absent from it. God is in the middle of things, so that even in the face of conflict Jesus can affirm that the "one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone" (8:29; 16:32). Sending is an action of the God who is present, not a God who is absent.

Offering Life — Confronting with Truth

Sending presupposes that God is separated from the world and yet engaged with the world. A gap stands between God and human beings, and for a genuine relationship to exist this gap must be overcome. The separation is usually depicted in spatial terms: God is associated with heaven while people belong to the earth. God is above while human beings are below. But the spatial imagery describes what is essentially a relational issue: human estrangement from God. The problem is not that God lives in one part of the universe while human beings inhabit another. Rather, it is that people are estranged from their Creator (see pp. 59-74).

Rather than accepting separation, God engages the world. He sends emissaries in order that the world might know the One who made it. God entrusts those whom he sends with two main tasks: The first is to bring the message of salvation and life. Those who are sent are to call the world to faith, so that relationships with God might be restored and people might have life. This is the primary purpose of the sending. The second task is confrontational. Those whom God sends are to tell the world the truth about itself. They reveal the world's estrangement from God and bring its sin to light. They confront the world in order to startle people into awareness of their situation, so that they see their need for the life God offers. The

two aspects of the sending work together when people recognize their own need and receive God's gift of life. But the sending also leads to judgment when people refuse God's gift and insist on remaining alienated from him.

The interplay between offering life and confronting with truth is evident in scenes featuring John the Baptist, who is one of those "sent" by God. The prologue says that God sent John to be a witness (1:6-8). A witness speaks in contexts where the truth is disputed. If everything is clear, there is no need for testimony. In the opening scene of the Gospel, a delegation comes to John with questions about his identity and his reasons for baptizing. John lets them know that he is not the one who will ultimately carry out God's purposes (1:19-21). Then he tells his questioners about themselves. He says that they are unable to recognize the one who will carry out the work of God, even though that one already stands among them (1:26-27). This reveals their limitations. The next day John goes further. He points to Jesus, calling him "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). The goal of John's witness is that people might believe through him (1:7). Faith is the primary purpose for which he is sent. Yet as John bears witness to the Lamb, he also attests to the sin of the world, which must be taken away. To believe that God has sent the Lamb means believing that the world has a need for its sin to be removed. John is sent to tell people the truth about their own separation from God and about what God is doing to overcome it.

John the Baptist also appears later in the Gospel, where some complain that people are now going to Jesus rather than coming to John. So John testifies that he was "sent" to prepare people for the Messiah (3:28). This is the positive side of his message. John compares himself to the best man at a wedding, who helps with arrangements, but steps aside when the bride comes to meet the groom. John testifies that Jesus is the messianic bridegroom. Therefore, people are to go to Jesus (3:29-30). According to this passage, God has "sent" Jesus to be the giver of life (3:34). People receive life from God by believing in Jesus, since faith is the relationship that is life-giving.

The counterpart to this is John's warning that those who do not believe thereby repudiate life and embrace God's wrath (3:36).⁸ This is the only reference to "wrath" (*orge*) in the Fourth Gospel. Wrath is God's judgment against human rejection of him. People were created for life with God, and when they turn away from life God finds it outrageous. There is no suggestion that God might simply remain indifferent toward human beings. God

loves the world and his will is to give it life, so when the world repudiates God's gift, it makes alienation the norm. If God's will is for relationship, then his judgment on human animosity toward him can only be negative.

When we turn to the ministry of Jesus, we find that the interplay between offering life and confronting with truth also characterizes his work. The Gospel says that Jesus is "sent" by God, but in a manner that differs from that of John the Baptist. God sends John in order to call people to faith, but God sends Jesus to be the focus for faith. In Jesus, God's communication takes embodied form. To believe in this embodied Word is to believe in the God who sends it. Similarly, to reject the message is to reject its divine Sender. Therefore Jesus can say, "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me" (12:44).⁹ It is clear that God sends Jesus in order that people might believe and have life: "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (3:17). Yet the need to continue confronting the world with truth persists. And when the world rejects the one whom God sends, it brings judgment upon itself (3:18-21).

God sends Jesus to perform actions that give life and reveal who God is. Jesus says, "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day" (9:4). Then he heals a blind man to show what kind of work he means. Many of the works God sends Jesus to do are called "signs" because they display God's power in a manner accessible to the senses. The Gospel says that signs reveal God's glory or *doxa*, using a term that suggests majestic radiance. The signs that show God's glory reveal his power and presence. The signs also help to show people who God is. Power can be revealed in many forms, but the signs reveal power in ways that give life. Jesus feeds people, heals the sick, and calls Lazarus out of the tomb. This exercise of creative and life-giving power reveals the character of God (11:4, 40).

People respond to the signs in different and often contradictory ways (see pp. 163-70). Those who perceive the signs through the eyes of faith respond positively and have their faith confirmed, but many either misinterpret the signs or respond negatively to them. Since Jesus heals on the Sabbath, many insist that he violates God's law, which says that no work is to be done on the Sabbath. From their perspective, God cannot have sent Jesus, since Jesus' actions run contrary to the will of God. From the perspective of a believer, the signs may reveal the life-giving power of God, but those who do not see things this way oppose what Jesus is doing and reject what he offers — and this brings them under judgment.

Jesus' preaching works with this movement between giving life and the need to confront the opposition. A good example is found in a debate that takes place in the temple. Jesus' opponents find what he says about himself and his Father to be incomprehensible (8:12-20). When replying, Jesus makes specific reference to the sending motif. He says, "the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him" (8:26). So what has Jesus heard from God? Part of what he says in this context is clearly confrontational. He tells his opponents, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world," and "I told you that you would die in your sins" (8:23-24a). God has sent Jesus into the world to tell it the truth about sin and death. His words are disturbingly blunt — and this is evidently the point. What Jesus says is designed to unsettle his hearers. But this is not his last word.

Jesus continues speaking and says that his hearers will die in their sins "unless" they believe (8:24b). The word "unless" is like a window bringing light into a darkened room. It means that separation from God need not be final. "Unless" extends the prospect of change, and the shape this change takes is faith. Jesus says that sin is overcome and relationships restored when people come to believe in him, or more specifically, to "believe that I Am" (8:24b). The expression "I Am" recalls the traditional biblical name of God (Exod. 3:14; Deut. 32:39; Isa. 45:18). To believe that Jesus is "I Am" is to believe that in him God encounters people. God sends Jesus to call people away from unbelief and toward the God who made them. If telling his hearers the truth about themselves is part of Jesus' message, the other part is the offer of life that comes through faith.

Images of God in the Preaching of Jesus

As Jesus is sent, he bears witness to God by using richly metaphorical language. At the close of his ministry he tells the disciples, "I have said these things to you in figures of speech (*paroiniai*). The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father" (16:25). To use figurative language is to speak of one thing in terms appropriate to another. Jesus will use images that are both similar to and different from God. This means that listeners must discern analogies between things that are otherwise dissimilar.¹⁰ For example, Jesus calls God his Father, yet the Gospel makes clear that God does not beget children in

the way that a human father does (1:13). Therefore, the expression must be taken in another way (see pp. 47-52). This pattern continues each time an image is used for God. People must distinguish what the image does and does not say about God.

Jesus' listeners and even his disciples find his figurative speech confusing, and want Jesus to speak more plainly (10:6, 24; 16:29). Yet Jesus cannot speak of God directly. God is different from the world, which is why Jesus uses figurative speech. The imagery is not designed to obscure meanings that can be plainly stated but to communicate the mystery of the unseen God in earthly forms.¹¹ Here we will consider the way God is portrayed in several passages, noting the continued interplay between the themes of life and judgment.

First, God is like a *craftsman*. Jesus makes this tacit comparison during a dispute over his right to heal on the Sabbath. He says that he can heal because his Father "is still working" (5:17). In what follows Jesus describes a scene that was familiar in many towns and villages. A father would work at a trade and teach it to his son. If the father was a potter he would work at his wheel, forming clay into jars, cups, dishes, and other items. When a boy was young he would play in the shop, watching his father do this work. As the boy grew older the father would give him some clay and show him how to mould it into a simple bowl. The boy would develop his skills by watching the father and learning to do what the father did. In time the father would entrust the son with certain responsibilities, which he was expected to carry out. Giving the son a trade was what a father would do out of love.

Jesus alludes to this pattern by saying that "the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing" (5:19-20a). Here the Father is like a master craftsman, instructing his Son.¹² And what is God's trade? To raise the dead and give them life (5:21). Since giving life is what God does, this is what he sends Jesus to do by acts of healing. In the immediate context Jesus gives life by healing a boy of a fever and raising a lame man to his feet (4:50; 5:8). The Son's actions carry out the life-giving work of the Father. Another aspect of God's work is judgment. God is the judge of all the earth (Gen. 18:25), but now he has now entrusted this part of the business to Jesus.

The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son" (John 5:22). If Jesus pronounces judgment on the unbelief of those he meets, he is carrying out the responsibilities the Father has given him (5:14, 38).

Later in this passage, God becomes a *witness* who is drawn into court. Jesus finds himself accused of wrongdoing, since he claims that he can work on the Sabbath because God does so (5:17). During a legal hearing witnesses were commonly summoned in order to testify on behalf of the prosecution and the defense. According to the law, two or three witnesses were needed to sustain a charge in court (Deut. 17:6; 19:15). As part of his defense, Jesus must summon witnesses to testify on his behalf. The problem is the peculiar nature of the case. The plaintiffs charge that Jesus is a human being trying to elevate himself to divine status, which is sin (John 5:18). Jesus counters that he is not acting in opposition to God. Rather, he has been sent by God and works in obedience to God.

So has God sent Jesus or hasn't he? As the defendant, Jesus understands that he needs to call God to take the witness stand on his behalf. The problem is how to get God to appear in court. The challenge is daunting, yet Jesus does introduce two forms of testimony from God. One concerns the kind of work that Jesus is doing. Jesus points out that he is giving life, not destroying it. Anyone can take life away, but giving life is exactly what the Creator does. By empowering Jesus to give life through healing, God testifies that he has indeed sent him. (5:21, 36). The other form of testimony is God's written deposition. In the Scriptures God testified that he would send someone to speak on his behalf. Moses set it down in the record, and Jesus assumes that his opponents have read the text (Deut. 18:18; John 5:37-39, 46). Jesus expects his opponents to agree that God has spoken through the Scriptures. What must be argued is that Jesus is the one to whom the Scriptures point. If what Jesus says is true, then those who reject Jesus reject God's own testimony. After all, the Scriptures include an affidavit saying that God will hold people accountable for their unbelief (Deut. 18:18; John 5:45).

Another passage portrays God as a gracious *host at a banquet*, though the actions visible to the eye are performed by Jesus. He invites a great crowd of people to recline on the grass, which was a common posture at a banquet. It means they are to lie down on their sides, propped up by their left arms, with their right hands free to hold the food. No one has asked Jesus to provide a meal. As host he assumes the initiative (6:4-5, 10). Taking five loaves of barley bread, he gives thanks and distributes it to the people. Then he does the same with two fish. The guests are allowed to eat as much as they want, as was proper. Then Jesus has the leftover fragments gathered up, and they fill twelve baskets (6:12-13). As a good host he is generous but not wasteful with food.¹³

Jesus' interactions with the crowd depict, in miniature, God's interactions with the world. After Jesus has conveyed a message by his actions, he comments on its meaning in the discourse that follows. God is identified as the host of the meal. By giving bread to the crowd Jesus attests that God gives bread to the world (6:32-33). More startling is that Jesus is identified as the bread God offers (6:35). This alters the perception of God's action. Barley bread gives life physically, but bread in the form of a person gives life relationally. God gives Jesus to the world in order to bring people into renewed relationship with himself. This is life in the theological sense.

God's will to preserve life is expressed in Jesus' act of gathering up the fragments "that nothing may be lost" at the end of the banquet (6:12). It is the will of God that Jesus "lose nothing" of all that has been given him, "but raise it up on the last day" (6:39). By giving Jesus, God provides the "bread" or means of relationship that sustains faith. To believe is to have life with God now, and this relationship has a future through the promise of resurrection. Jesus' actions and the words that interpret them convey the will of God in visible and audible form.

Finally, Jesus depicts God as a *vine dresser*. A vineyard is planted with vines, each of which has a main stalk from which the branches grow. During the growing season a worker examines the vines and removes any lifeless branches that bear no fruit. These are piled at the edge of the vineyard and later burned. The worker also prunes away the excess growth that detracts from the vine's ability to produce large clusters of grapes. At the harvest, the vine dresser rejoices at the fruit that the vine yields.

Jesus identifies himself as the vine, his followers as the branches, and God as the vine dresser. Love is the fruit that the vine dresser desires (15:1-17). On the surface the imagery is placid, yet closer inspection discloses actions of God that seem remarkably severe: "He removes (*airō*) every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes (*kathairō*) to make it bear more fruit" (15:2). We might expect the acts of cutting to depict God's stance toward the unbelieving world, but here they portray his relationship to the followers of Jesus. They are the branches being tended by the Father. The assumption is that sin is not limited to the outside world. It persists even within the Christian community.¹⁴

So what does it mean for God to remove a branch? A fruitless branch has already lost its vital connection with the vine. The complete absence of fruit shows that the branch is no longer drawing life from the stalk. Note that there is no speculation about what might cause a branch to become