

Was Jesus “Making Himself Equal with God”?

by Servetus the Evangelical

Once when Jesus attended one of the feasts at Jerusalem, he saw a man sitting by a pool of water who had been paralyzed, apparently from the waist down, for thirty-eight years. Jesus said to him, “Arise, take up your pallet [bedding], and walk” (John 5.8). The man did so, it was the Sabbath, and he was accused of breaking it.

The Sabbath is the seventh day of the week on the Jewish calendar. It was supposed to be “holy,” meaning set apart from the other six days for the worship of God. One of the Ten Commandments forbids physical labor on the Sabbath (Exodus 20.8-11).

The penalty for breaking the Sabbath was most severe. The Torah is God’s Law, and it states unequivocally, “whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall surely be put to death” (Exodus 31.15; cf. v. 14).

But what constitutes work? There are no easy answers. E.P. Sanders explains, “The written law is very incomplete; in theory it covers all of life, but it often lacks details. Consequently, it had to be extended and applied in all kinds of ways.”

Indeed, that is why Judaism later interpreted and condensed the Torah into 613 laws, 39 of them on Sabbath-breaking, with some activities specifically identified as “work.”

Pre-Christian Judaism debated what constitutes “work” and a “burden.” Philo argued that God never ceases his creative activity, even on the Sabbath. Rabbis agreed that God performs his moral work as Revealer and Judge every day. Many rabbis claimed that God sustains his creation on the Sabbath day, even by healing. Therefore, Judaism permitted medical doctors to work on the Sabbath if an illness or injury was life-threatening.

Occasionally, Jesus exposed religious error, either in the Jews’ doctrine or in their practice. When he did, he sometimes pointed out that some of the 613 laws of Judaism did not accurately reflect the Torah; rather, they were misinterpretations of it.

One of these 39 Judaic laws about Sabbath-keeping forbade the carrying of anything on the Sabbath. The load carried was regarded as a “burden,” so that the activity was deemed as “work.” That is why “the Jews” told the man Jesus healed that he was not permitted to carry his pallet on the Sabbath because it was a burden (John 5.10). The man replied that Jesus had told him to do it (v. 15).

So, we read that “for this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. But He answered them, ‘My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.’ For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God” (John 5.16-18).

Many Christians have misunderstood this last sentence as being the assessment of not only “the Jews” but the author John as well, so that they believe it is correct. But an analysis clarifies that John reports only the Jews’ assessment, which is not his own.

Jesus often affirmed the Torah and therefore keeping the Sabbath day holy. Yet he did break two of the Jews’ 39 laws that were about Sabbath-keeping. These two laws were that it was unlawful to heal someone or to carry a burden on the Sabbath. But man’s laws are not necessarily God’s laws, and neither are man’s interpretations always correct.

According to the Bible, Jesus healed someone on at least four different Sabbath days. Each time, religious officials accused him of breaking the Sabbath. Sometimes, he replied

by asking his accusers if their animal or son fell into a pit on the Sabbath day, wouldn't they promptly rescue them. Then Jesus would explain that humans are of more value than animals. So, Jesus denied that he broke the Sabbath because God doesn't condemn healing or delivering people from life-threatening situations on that holy day.

Therefore, John is not expressing his own opinion, that Jesus was "making Himself equal with God," but that of the Jews. He says they were seeking to kill Jesus because they alleged that he was breaking the Sabbath and making himself equal with God by calling God his Father and associating his own works with God's works. But Jesus had taught his disciples to call God their "Father," and Christians have never thought that in their doing so they were making themselves equal with God. Plus, Christians have always believed that God does much of his work through his faithful, obedient people.

Many Bible readers fail to grasp that Jesus' response, recorded in John 5.19-47, is a clear denial that he claimed equality with God. John writes, "Jesus therefore answered and was saying to them" (v. 19), that is, he put forth a rebuttal. Then John records it. In this rebuttal Jesus explains concerning himself, "the Son can do nothing of Himself," and "I can do nothing on My own initiative" (vv. 19, 30). Jesus herein admits to his own inadequacy and affirms his utter dependence upon God his Father. He says that the Father gives him the power to do miracles (v. 36) and the authority to raise the dead (v. 21), give eternal life (v. 26), and judge and execute judgment (vv. 22, 27, 30). So, Jesus reveals that all of these things are not intrinsic to his own self, but derived from the Father, showing that he himself is not God.

Moreover, Jesus herein calls the Father "the one and only God" (John 5.44). And he later prayed to the Father, calling him "the only true God" (17.3). Both times he affirmed the Shema, the Jews' brief creedal statement. It declares, "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" (Deuteronomy 6.4). Jews have always understood it to mean that God is numerically one, which their Scriptures often state.

In sum, Jesus reveals his utter dependence on, and subordination to, God his Father. This is a clear disclaimer that he makes himself equal with God. Such clarification seems to have satisfied his opponents because no witness ever came forth and alleged at the Sanhedrin's interrogation of Jesus that he ever claimed to be God or equal with God.