

PART

1

AUTHENTIC PREACHING:

SHARPENING SUBSTANCE THROUGH

Sermon Content

I. SERMON MESSAGE FEEDS ON SCRIPTURE

Where would you look for a pattern of authentic preaching that grows out of its divine origin like a plant springs from its soil? My search led me to John the Revelator. Apostle. Pastor. Preacher. By my vote, he is conferred the recognition of “preaching-pastor emeritus.” Because of his aggressive witness and fruitful proclamation of the gospel to his world and his district of seven churches (Revelation 1-3), he was thrown into prison on the Isle of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. His Patmos prison would rank among such notable penitentiaries as John Bunyan’s Bedford Prison, where he gave birth to the allegory *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and Nelson Mandela’s Robben Island, where he spent eighteen of his twenty-seven years in prison. Nevertheless, John continued speaking and writing as the Holy Spirit gave him unction.

I submit that the book of Revelation is essentially a *sermon* prepared by John initially for delivery to his district of seven churches. Through his sermons he as a pastor not only fed his immediate flock but also provides an eschatological message for today with *several principles of authentic preaching* worthy of our notice and practice. Take a look at Revelation 1:1, 2, which sets the stage for the first quality of pulpit discourse: “*The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto Him to show unto His servants things which must shortly come to pass. And He sent and signified it by His angel unto His servant John, who bore record of the Word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw*” (KJ21).



Notice the origin of the book of Revelation. Does John produce its content through his own ingenuity? Considering Revelation to be an extended form of proclamation, what enabled this sermon of John to become the word of God or God's word to become the sermon of John? You will find an answer when noticing the heavy hitting lineup of personalities transmitting the message in Revelation 1:1. Here you have a procedural order beginning with God the Father, Jesus Christ, His angel, and then John. Although John the preacher finds himself among rarefied company from the heavenly realm, he has no intrinsic authority aside from being the immediate link between the divine and the human in a chain of command forwarding the message of God to the people of God. This is human participation in a supernatural mission.

Should you be concerned about the apparent absence of the Holy Spirit during this divine-human encounter of Revelation 1:1, remember that John himself testifies that his epiphanic experience included being also “in the Spirit” (Revelation 1:10). What an example for all preaching! I would affirm that any person involved in a serious attempt to speak effectively for God in our day would do well to begin prayerfully with God and His word, the *Bible*, which the Holy Spirit inspired. Let us forego for now the temptation to analyze the procedural methodology that John mentions above on how the inspired message of God reached him. However, Revelation 1:1 more than suggests collaborative participation of heavenly personalities sharing inspired information with John and proleptically with preachers during the end of the age, including you and me as well. In short, sharpening *sermon content* begins by sharpening itself with “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17).

Do you think it probable that when John the Revelator prepared his sermons, being the youngest of the twelve apostles, that he might have been a bit more venturesome and made use also of nonbiblical sources for reading and studying beyond his Hebrew/Aramaic Old Testament and his Greek Septuagint? I can imagine that somewhere along the way he probably became aware of Plato (the ancient Greek philosopher of the fifth century B.C.) who defined reality as a universe of ideas expressed by the word *logos* and also of Philo (25 B.C.-A.D. 50), a contemporary of John and a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher “who drank deeply from Platonism.”¹ However, neither Plato nor Philo interpreted their *logos* doctrine to mean a personal God like



the Hebrew God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but rather an “it” or impersonal force. It is a point of interest that John the Patmos preacher under divine inspiration made use of that same word *logos* but with a higher meaning: the preexistent Christ. His Gospel reads: “In the beginning was the Word [*logos*], and the Word [*logos*] was with God and the Word [*logos*] was God” (John 1:1). And in verse 14: “The Word [*logos*] became flesh.”

Further on, in John 17:17, he equates the *logos* with truth: “Sanctify them through Thy truth; Thy word [*logos*] is truth,” both incarnate and written and preached! I am merely affirming that being the youngest apostle, John might have been more open to a wider range of resources for proclaiming

the gospel of his Lord. A notable degree of uniqueness by John among his apostolic peers in the New Testament may further be noted by the fact of his being the only writer and preacher of Holy Writ who applies *logos* as a designation of Christ (John 1:1; Revelation 19:13). It is reasonable, in my opinion, to understand John that may have been open-minded and sufficiently inquisitive to access classical Greek encyclopedias, and more adept at utilizing the “internet” or “logos software” of his day. Is it possible that such a wider scope for sermon material or communication resources might have influenced the focus of his Gospel toward being non-synoptic and, thereby, decidedly different from the biographical emphasis of Jesus Christ found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke? Apparently, authentic preaching practiced by John grew out of the inspired Word of God while also being alert to contemporary sources that appropriately support and reinforce gospel truth.

Let us pause for a moment and ask, what do we mean by “authentic preaching”?

I would propose here a short answer. At its core, genuine *gospel proclamation sounds the depths of Scripture by respecting and searching for the Bible writer’s original meaning and message and aims to release in the sermon text and to apply it to contemporary needs*. How important is it that sermons be grounded in Scripture? How does that happen? When the faith community assembles for worship, seeking refuge from life’s challenges and expecting reinforcements for what may lie ahead of them at home, work, or play, these expectant souls gather with principally one question stamped on

their hearts: “*Is there any word from the LORD?*” (Jeremiah 37:17). People cry out not for your word but the word of God, although they know that you serve as spokesperson answering the gospel imperative to “go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:60, NIV). Nevertheless, like the ready response of a handmaiden to her mistress, the authentic sermon answers swiftly: “*Yes, there is a word from the Lord, and I bring to you that word from Scripture for this particular moment of worship.*”

The practical “how” for the word of God becoming “His word in your sermon” addressed to the waiting congregation begins (again we say) by first lifting your heart in prayer asking the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit for proclamation wisdom, enlightenment, and insight (James 1:5), while also acknowledging the place of God’s assisting angel messengers. Then you proceed by asking and answering three fundamental questions of your sermon text, namely:

1. What does my sermon text **SAY**? This initial inquiry helps you establish the most accurate wording or translation of your main text by comparing several Bible versions. If you are able and venturesome, try your hand at your own translation, and compare yours with others.
2. What does my sermon text **MEAN** by what it says? While the previous question about textual word accuracy is somewhat external, pursuing the *meaning* of the Bible writer is more internal, as you seek to get beneath his skin and into his mind as much as you reasonably can. We are talking about interpreting the message and intent of

the prophet from whose Bible book you selected your sermon text, a journey we call *hermeneutics*, or the search for meaning. It can be an exciting and rewarding study if you focus on *textual context* and *textual content* and not become too distracted by tributaries that do not feed into the main textual reservoir of truth. For sure, you are already familiar with typical research sources that can be of immense help, such as different Bible versions, commentaries, Bible dictionaries, Bible word studies, and the many sources in the internet.

3. How may I **APPLY** this text to the practical needs of contemporary life? We might say this is where the rubber meets the road or where flesh connects with bone. What good is sermon truth if it does not touch real life and make a difference in the yearning and pining, the longing and craving of people? We must remember that the Bible was written by approximately forty inspired prophets spanning a period of nearly 1,600 years, with the last of its books completed about A.D. 95 by John the revelator and preacher. It is only reasonable, informative, and practical to become familiar with those earlier cultures and communities of centuries ago and compare and contrast our life situations with theirs. Such an awareness on the part of contemporary preaching enables the sermon to make a realistic application of a biblical truth to life as we know it today.

John the Patmos pastor alluded to this incarnational experience when he wrote in his Gospel about the divine Christ becoming flesh, the

divine-human mystery, which dressed salvation with practical clothing. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14, NIV). Understanding and respecting context and content of the Bible’s world as well as the contemporary world of you and your worshippers are *sine qua non* if you would proclaim the gospel genuinely to influence and change lives for the kingdom of God.

Finally, imagine you are selecting important ingredients for your sermon casserole. You will be wisely aware that your message can only be as nourishing as its main ingredient, the Bible, *sola Scriptura*, the historic mantra of the Christian pulpit. Added condiments to your sermon by the way of illustrations, quotes, examples, and statistics will play supporting roles toward helping the main authentic dish to nurture, satisfy, and save. What a powerful cuisine!