

Sermon File # 685

Scripture Text: John 1:6-9

Sermon Title: *An Authentic Witness*

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On Sunday Morning 4 December 2011

At International Baptist Church of Brussels, Belgium

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

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An Authentic Witness

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to our text for today, as we continue our series from the prologue (introduction) of John 1:1-18. During these four Sundays of Advent, my prayer is that God will speak to us through the Evangelist John about the eternal Word, Christ, who became flesh to dwell among us and reveal the glory of God to us.

Last week we looked at the first five verses as we considered what John said about Christ as the eternal Word. Today's text seems something like a prosaic parenthesis, which John possibly inserted later into the poetic prologue, bringing us "back down to earth," as it were (Burge, 56). For a moment our thoughts are directed away from the lofty places of Christ's preexistence, and before giving us the significance of Christ's incarnation beginning with verse 9, John focuses on the crucially important ministry of John the Baptist. These verses tell us about his ministry in summary form. The other Gospels give us additional details about his birth and prophetic preaching ministry, but here in John's Gospel we read more in the first and third chapters about John the Baptist as an authentic witness.

Follow as I read **John 1:1-9**, focusing on verses **6-9**.

Perhaps as at no other time of the year, Christmas is an exceptionally advantageous time to witness to family, friends and associates as we share the meaning of the Christmas celebration.

Ten Christmases ago, my wife, Nancy, read a little book about the historical events of Christmas (an approach to “the Bible as history”) to her public school elementary music classes in the US. She was summarily informed by one of her second graders, whose parents might have belonged to the American Civil Liberties Union, that she wasn’t supposed to talk about Jesus in school. She replied that she was telling them that the history of Christmas is centered in the birth of Jesus. When she taught about other national holidays, like Thanksgiving, she told about Governor Bradford, so when she taught about Christmas she told about Jesus. She taught about Jesus at Christmas just as she taught about the presidents on Presidents Day. (She did stop short of giving an evangelistic message and public invitation to receive Christ!) In other words, Christmas is fairly meaningless apart from at least the mention of Jesus. As followers of Christ, it’s appropriate to witness for him at Christmas.

John tells us about the role of John the Baptist as a witness to Christ. The word and concept used in the Gospel of John for witness runs throughout the book. “Witness” is used 14 times in the noun form and 33 times as a verb (Borchert, 111). Our text tells us this forerunner of Jesus, the last of the Old Testament prophets, was a bridge between the Old and the New Covenant (Testaments). John the Baptist/Baptizer was a man whose diet consisted of locusts and wild honey and who preached a message of judgment and the call to repentance in the desert wilderness. His unusual, counter-cultural lifestyle is an indication he may have belonged to the prophetic Qumran community (Witherington, 384).

Regardless of any eccentricities, John the Baptist models for us the life and ministry of an authentic witness in contrast to the many false witnesses of his day. Instead of being called John the Baptizer, a more accurate moniker would be John the Witness (Borchert, 111). He also stands out in sharp contrast to today’s false witnesses and charlatan television evangelists. Such personalities of today are teaching a perverted form of the Gospel, and are bringing discredit to the name of Christ by their dishonorable lives and misleading message. But also, whose lives are less publicized, can be false witnesses if we are inconsistent in fulfilling our calling to live Christ-honoring lives and give a credible witness to those around us, in the workplace, classroom or communities where God has placed us.

The need today is for lives that match our words and that give a faithful witness for Christ. Our text, in these succinct verses, tells us the characteristics of an authentic witness. An authentic witness is one whose life is characterized, first of all by...

A relationship with God

Our text distinguishes sharply between the eternal Word, Christ, and the man John the Baptist. Christ, who was incarnated as Jesus, the God-Man, is without beginning. In fact, as we saw in verses 1-5, he is the Co-Creator with God the

Father and God the Holy Spirit. He is the Second Person of the eternal Godhead. In contrast is John the Baptist, who was created.

In verse 3, Christ is described as the Co-Creator, who created all things, and the word used is “egeneto.” In verse 6, John the Baptist is presented as a man who came/who was created: “egeneto anthropos.” Literally, “There was created a man who was sent from God: his name was John” (Hull, 215).

An authentic witness is a creature of God who has been...

Selected by God

John the Baptist was one created and also selected by God. This is very clear in Luke’s “pre-Christmas narratives” that tell us about the conception and birth of John the Baptist to the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. An angel of the Lord announced that Elizabeth would give birth to a son who would be “great in the sight of the Lord” (Luke 1:15). When the young Virgin Mary had received word from the angel Gabriel about her Holy Spirit-conception of Jesus, she went to visit her relative Elizabeth. The Scripture tells us that when Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, “the baby (John the Baptist) leaped in her womb for joy” (Luke 1:41; 44). Obviously, the special favor of God rested on the baby who became John the Prophet/Baptizer.

An authentic witness is a mortal human being, created by God in his image. John the Baptist was a unique personality for certain! And God has created each one of us in our distinctiveness for his pleasure and glory. Never despise what God has created in you, and trust that he is continuing to complete his creation in you as he shapes your character into his likeness. God has created us to reflect his glory and in salvation we are called into a personal relationship with him as his chosen creatures. We who claim to be Christians are those who have been chosen in Christ from before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4).

We believed and were born again, not because of our first seeking God, but because he first appointed us to eternal life (Acts 13:48). None of us can claim she/he is saved because she/he first sought God. We were dead in our transgressions and sins until the Holy Spirit stirred and awakened our hearts to believe (Ephesians 2:1). And just as John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit, so we too have been selected for eternal life and are also to be filled with the Holy Spirit in order to fulfill our potential for life and service.

John the Baptist not only came into being and became a child of God, he also was, like us...

Sent from God

John the Baptist was one who was sent from God, which means he had a personal relationship with God. When he came for witnessing and preaching it was obvious that he had come from God. John the Baptist witnessed and ministered out of a relationship with God that was real and personal. He could point others to God because he himself knew God.

I know a man who is retired from ministry who lives in North Kansas City, Missouri. His job now is with a travel agency, and he specializes in travel to Australia. I asked Wendell about Australia, since this is a place I have never visited. He confessed he has not been there either. He's in somewhat of a professional dilemma. Evidently he has to sell a number of trips to Australia before he can earn his own trip to the Land Down Under. I would think he is at a distinct disadvantage of having to sell folks on a place he has never been himself (I wonder till this day if he's ever made his first trip to Australia).

Of course, an authentic witness to Jesus Christ is someone who knows Jesus personally, and is sent from him to tell others about that relationship. How can you lead someone else to go where you haven't been yourself?

This is true not only about our initial experience of salvation through faith in Jesus which we call our rebirth, but this is true pertaining to our ongoing relationship with Jesus. An authentic witness is one who can relate a fresh experience with God. Inquirers want to know the difference a relationship with Jesus makes in your life today. They want to know what he has done for you lately.

An authentic witness is one sent from God in a daily walk with God. The late Francis Schaeffer used to write about the tragedy of a Christian's life that is too busy with the things of this world to have a quiet walk with God and a conscious awareness of living before God in the power of the Holy Spirit. He called for an "active passivity," a life that balances passive surrender and resignation to God with active faith and obedience in the power of the Spirit (Schaeffer, 58f). Obviously, John sought to live and serve in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus answered his enemies by telling of the greatness of John the Baptist, and how they refused to repent at his powerful preaching. He said, "I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John;" Jesus added some amazing words that should humble each one of us: "Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Luke 7:28). John the Baptist was Jesus' forerunner and the link between the Old and the New Covenants. We are privileged to belong to the New Covenant and to live this side of the resurrection of Jesus. We are this side of Pentecost, and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. We are able to live our entire lives in the full measure of the Holy Spirit, and are part of the eternal Kingdom through the church of the risen Lord.

We should live as authentic witnesses, daily and continually filled with the Holy Spirit. We belong to the powers of the New Age of the living Christ. Every morning when you step outside your house, you should live as one sent from God, with the incredible privilege of representing him and giving a witness for him. Through our lives of holiness, love, and obedience, and by our words about Jesus, God will work through us even in ways beyond the work of John the Baptist. We are allowed to introduce people to the power of the completed work of Jesus. We join God in his work of drawing people to himself. God wants first of all to fill us his people, that we might become his witnesses he has selected and is sending as missional people in the power of the Holy Spirit.

These words describing the appointment of John the Baptist as “sent from God” are “exalted terms,” which are used of Jesus in 16:27 and of the Holy Spirit in 15:26 (Whitacre, 53). You too are chosen and called to this exalted position as a witness and an ambassador for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20).

This past week I watched a television news journalist interview the newly appointed US Ambassador to China, Gary Locke, who had formerly been Governor of the State of Washington and then US Secretary of Commerce. He spoke of the high honor of this appointment and yet his commitment to living a simple, family-oriented lifestyle, shunning the privileges of his new status as arguably the nation’s most important diplomat.

You and I are created, chosen and sent on a high mission that no one else can fill. We must approach our task as witnesses with humble dependence on God’s power to enable us to be his best representatives to those to whom God is sending us in our unique spheres of influence, with family, friends, colleagues and fellow students.

It is essential that as your pastor I be one who also is sent as an authentic witness. I am to teach by word and by example of one who is sent from God, and who bears evidence I have been and am walking with God. This church must be a Spirit-led, prayer-driven fellowship. It’s imperative that we be led, not by tradition or human opinion, but rather by the Lord Jesus. We must not depend on human ability and influence, but on the authority and truth of God’s Word and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As God’s people, we are to come forth from him in his power as sent from him. But also as his authentic witnesses we are also in a relationship that is...

Subservient to God

Our text is clear that John the Baptist was subordinate to Jesus, the true Light (verse 8). This attitude of humility is seen particularly in chapter 3, where John states his subordinate relationship to Jesus:

“He must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30).

Jesus himself, speaking about John the Baptist, said, “John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light” (John 5:35). Jesus was clearly saying John had a role to point others to him who is the true Light. John the Baptist came as a witness to the Light (John 1:7f). The Greek “hina” is emphatic: John witnessed “in order that” others might come to see the true Light, which is “the mission of every preacher of Christ” (Robertson, 8). As your pastor I am accountable to lead but also to lead as I submit to God and hold myself accountable to him (Hebrews 17:13). I’m so bold as to say, it’s the position of every child of God.

As the Apostle Paul said, we too, unlike the “superstars” who denigrated Paul and his leadership, are to say that Christ is our life, and to live is Christ (Philippians 1:21). Jesus is the Light of the world, and we are called to be lights in the world (Matthew 5:14), but like John the Baptist, our light is derived from and dependent on the true Light of the World (John 8:12). The Church Father Augustine (354-430) noted that a

lamp can be lit and put out but the true Light, the Word of God cannot be, and we are merely “lamps for the day” (31f).

Our world doesn't want to see people who have all the answers in themselves. Our world needs to see ordinary, struggling people who are learning to trust a great God. Your world around you needs to see in your life an authentically dependent person who is learning to trust an almighty, loving, and faithful God. They need to see that you, like John the Baptist, are under the Lordship of Christ.

An authentic witness is one who has a relationship with God and also who is characterized by...

A responsibility for others

An authentic witness is one who has a sense of responsibility for others, and realizes this is a personal, irreplaceable task. It is lifelong and non-negotiable. Our text says that John the Baptist “came as a witness....” And we know he died violently as a martyr after his faithful ministry was completed (Matthew 14:1-12).

The word in our text for witness is “martureo.” From that word we get the English word, “martyr,” which means one who dies for his/her faith. The early witnesses were so faithful to Christ they were willing to die for their faith, and often did. Thus the word for witness became synonymous with one who dies for her or his faith.

The first stanza of the prologue ends with how the darkness of the world didn't understand, or perhaps better, didn't overcome the Light, Christ Jesus (5). The spiritual darkness and evil of the fallen world “met a courageous witness” to the Light in John the Baptist (Hull, 215), who witnessed even unto death.

Today there is a widespread assault on believers. It would be difficult to convince many believers in various parts of the world that they are to be raptured before any Great Tribulation. Ask believers throughout Nigeria, North Africa, the Middle East and Asia if they are looking for a pre-tribulation rapture. No, they realize Jesus is speaking to them when he calls us to share in his suffering and to persevere in witness even unto death. People like Pastor Yousef in Iran are given the opportunity to renounce their faith in Christ and are being offered the option of retaining their lives if they “choose to convert” to Islam. But many are witnessing unto death as martyrs. In that they are following the example of John the Baptist, a martyr, a witness.

Like John the Baptist, an authentic witness has a responsibility for others that is, first of all...

Focused on the task

As an authentic witness, John the Baptist didn't just give information about Jesus, but zealously sought to lead the lost to repentance. He introduced people to the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). In this matter, John the Baptist shared the same purpose as John the Evangelist (see John 20:31). The

word “believe” is found 98 times in John’s Gospel (Morris, *NIVSB*, 1593). This was his intent—to lead people to believe.

Some have the calling and gift of evangelist, which Paul lists as a leadership gift in the church (Ephesians 4:11). But every believer is called to be a witness, and to share Christ with those in her/his sphere of influence.

A lot of churches are evangelical—a term that defines what is believed theologically. But not every evangelical church is evangelistic, which defines the practice of a particular church. But an evangelistic church can fall short of God’s purposes just as can a missionary church. I believe God has called every one of us to be a missional Christian, which is one who is on mission to take Christ out into the world, instead of trying to bring the lost into the church or simply sending others to the mission field. Our focus is not just to disseminate information about Christ, but to do whatever it takes, in the power, wisdom and love of the Spirit, to lead them to faith in Christ.

We are to stay focused, and only the grace of God will enable us to be...

Faithful to the task

The only work we do that bears fruit is work that is with God. The only way we can know to join God and to link up with his purposes is through prayer. Our work and witness must be participation with God, and the only way we can link up with him is through prayer.

Being a faithful witness, as John the Baptist knew, requires the grace of God and the anointing of the Spirit in our lives. Your witness requires the divine power of God to sustain you and to encourage you, especially when it seems your witness is spurned and ineffective. Your part is to be faithful.

John the Baptist was faithful to fulfill his calling. Even though his life ending in a violent martyrdom, he had finished the work that God had appointed him to do. And this is all that the Lord requires of you—to be faithful, whether or not your witness appears to be immediately successful.

I think of some of you who have prayed for and witnessed to a friend, a child or even your unsaved spouse. Because you have such a burden is a good sign that God purposes to save that individual. God has drawn your heart to join with his heart of love and compassion, and you are participating in the sovereign, eternal purposes of God, who will hear your prayers and will make you to be...

Fruitful in the task

Your part is to be faithful. God himself will make your witness fruitful, as he did the witness of John the Baptist. We can see how John’s witness pointed his own disciples and others, like John the Evangelist, to Jesus (1:35-37), who no doubt “must have had a deep sense of gratitude that John had introduced him to Jesus” (Fredrickson, 37). In this Gospel of John we have a “marvelous summary” of the effectiveness and fruitfulness of John the Baptist’s witness. He had prepared the

way for the Lord through preparing the hearts of “many people” to come to Jesus (10:40-42; Carson, 120f).

We find true significance in our being faithful to the calling God has given us to be his witnesses. We can begin by being faithful and authentic in our walk with Jesus.

If you are one selected by God’s grace, then your life has eternal significance. As you submit to his will and walk in his presence, you are one of his sent ones. Your life, like John the Baptist’s, can have eternal significance. Your life, surrendered to him, and living by his Word, will bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit. You will bear the fruit that Jesus says characterizes a truly regenerate child of God. Like John the Baptist, you may not live to see all the fruit of your life, but in eternity you will realize that God honored your faithful witness to family, friends and those you have perhaps long forgotten.

Conclusion:

Perhaps you are here this morning as an unbeliever. Today God is confronting you with his witness about his Son, Jesus. You must decide what you will do about him—to accept the witness or to reject God’s witness about his Son. He has also given you the witness of others, such as a spouse, parent or a friend who has been sharing with you and praying for you.

A witness has to take a stand, and cannot remain neutral. The language John the Evangelist uses for John the Baptist is “courtroom language” (Carson, 120). “If I take my stand in the witness box and testify that such-and-such is the truth of the matter I am no longer neutral. I have committed myself” (Morris, *NIC*, 90). Just as a witness in a courtroom cannot remain silent, and that the life of the defendant might depend on us, so we must be faithful, bold witnesses for Christ in behalf of those under condemnation.

You today maybe are being called to become a child of God. You will not be allowed to remain neutral. You will, upon conversion, be called to the witness stand. It will cost you your former way of life, and perhaps your old friends. You will be called upon to witness until death. And, who knows that you will not also be called to be a witness unto death?

Each one of us, as professing believers, needs to renew a commitment to live for and walk with God in a life-changing relationship. We will be witnesses or we will deny our Lord. And, we will be either good witnesses or inauthentic, hypocritical ones. This Christmas is a good time to commit anew to be an authentic witness for Christ. We need to ask the Lord God to make us aware of unique opportunities to share Christ this Advent Season, perhaps by inviting guests to our home and seeing symbolic Christmas decorations and hearing from us the message of Christ’s birth. It’s perfectly legal in this country to talk about Jesus in your home! And Jesus is better news than any hoped-for upturn in the economy.

William Booth was the founder and for many years the leader of the Salvation Army. Every Christmas he would send a greeting to all the members of the Army. But one

particular year finances were critically low. He could afford to send a one-word only telegram around the world. What one word would he use for a Christmas greeting and word of challenge and encouragement? The word he chose was “others,” which became a motto for the Salvation Army. Evidently this motto “took,” with the spirit of sacrificial service embodying the members in the ensuing years.

On May 29th 1914 the Empress of Ireland, a ship carrying 1,477 passengers and crew, was struck by a freighter in a heavy fog on the St Lawrence River. 1,012 were drowned in the icy waters, making this the deadliest disaster in Canadian maritime history. Among the passengers were 175 Salvation Army officers in route to a conference http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RMS_Empress_of_Ireland. Of these, 167 SA officers were drowned, and not one body that was picked up had on a life-belt. The few survivors told how the Salvationists, finding there were not enough life-preservers for all, took off their own belts and strapped them upon even strong men, saying, ‘I can die better than you can;’ and from the deck of that sinking boat they flung their battle-cry around the world - Others!”
<http://www.salvationarmy.org/heritage.nsf/36c107e27b0ba7a98025692e0032abaa/df2ca83194d5599b802568cd00377023!OpenDocument>

We can die better than others. That’s why we are witnesses and must be faithful to our task. This is the reason we were saved. Not primarily to escape hell, but we were saved to glorify God by joining him on his rescue mission of redemption—to be his witnesses, “to testify *to others* about the Light and the One who gives life to all who believe. This Christmas Season could be our best opportunity to witness to the Light symbolized by all the lesser, artificial lights. May God help us in this hour of crisis when our world so needs God’s witnesses to be faithful, even unto death.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Do you agree that every Christian is either a true or false witness? Why or why not?
2. What are some examples of false witnesses today?
3. According to the text, what was the purpose of John the Baptist’s witness?
4. According to the New Testament, some are gifted to be evangelists (Ephesians 4:11) and yet all followers of Christ are his witnesses (Acts 1:8). What’s the difference between an evangelist and a witness?
5. How can God use each person’s uniqueness to be of distinct and unique usefulness as a witness for Christ?
6. How can we know that we are being faithful in our witness for Christ?

7. What are some of the indications that we are being fruitful in our witness, and what assurance do we have that our faithful witness will eventually bear fruit?

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