

M. Eugene Boring, *Hearing John's Voice: Insights for Teaching and Preaching*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019. 351 pages. \$29.99.

If the literature of the New Testament were to be divided between works that make their appeal to the head as reasoned argument and those that make their appeal to the heart as spiritual revelation, the Johannine tradition of texts would be the latter. This is likely why the vast majority of preachers are in unfamiliar territory when preaching from this witness to Christ. If we are honest, we feel far less sure-footed in proclaiming gospel from texts that are so unashamedly apocalyptic. Even though most of us were taught that apocalyptic was “the mother of all Christian theology,” as Käsemann so famously declared in 1960 (*New Testament Questions*, 102), this way of looking at the world is alien to us. How often do we choose the lections from *Revelation*, and how fearful is that decision when we do? Similarly, there are only a few texts in 1 John that are favorites, while the other Johannine epistles are not even Sunday lection choices. In the year that the Gospel of John dominates the lectionary, don't most preachers settle for approaching these stories with the same homiletic hermeneutic that worked when preaching the other Gospels? We typically treat them like a biographical AD–30 story of Jesus life, death, and resurrection rather than a prophetic revelation of the story of the Christ worshipped by a turn of the century Johannine Christian community.

In *Hearing John's Voice*, Boring assumes this homiletic and pedagogical context as the resistant reading most Christian preachers and teachers bring to these writings. He sets his task as the sherpa who can guide us to discover the wonder and wisdom of these otherwise strange voices. In three distinctly different genres, one of the three dominant expressions of what became the orthodox Christian expression of faith, Boring explores how these texts proclaim utter confidence in the Christ who providentially controls a believer's redemption. The volume is divided into four parts, each of which seeks to turn on its head the way preachers and teachers approach typically approach these texts.

In the first chapter, Boring begins with the assumption that the seer John's revelation provides the revelatory hermeneutic that discloses how this community approached its understanding of the world. Boring maintains that its revelatory hermeneutic best provides contemporary preachers and teachers with the teleological worldview that discloses the theology of all three expressions of Johannine faith. The revelation provides the formative key that unlocks the strange, prophetic, imagistic, apocalyptic world that was second nature to the people who worshipped the redeemer Christ. The revelation helped them to hear anew from their risen Lord and helped them made sense of their lives in a senseless world.

The remaining three chapters assume the hermeneutic insights Boring derives from the seer's vision as the appropriate apocalyptic framework to assist contemporary preachers and teachers find their way into this strange world of angels and demons, violence and power, insiders and outsiders. It is often depicted more in symbols than in substance, but is far from a flight into otherworldliness. Boring treats his exploration of these texts as an expression of the utter confidence of the community of the beloved disciple's God whose controlling hand is made apparent to those who believe. Argument is not needed to convince his readers of these truths, for this faith community receives apocalyptic revelation as prophetic truth.

In chapter 2, Boring explores this hermeneutic by turning to an analysis of the book of Revelation. We would likely turn to this work last, hoping that we had already found our footing in the other texts. It is, however, this Christian apocalypse that offers the most full-throated revelation of the Christ of faith and the One True God from a divine vantage point. Here a

prophetically-interpreted past and divinely-appointed future are presented as the eschatological present out of which a believer is invited to understand her or his life. It was a culturally customary way to present divine truth that offers hope when hope may seem far from daily reality. Boring divides the apocalypse into five portions (Rev 1, 2–3, 4–5, 6–18, and 19–22) and explores the development of a revelatory hermeneutic in each of these divisions.

Chapter 3 takes up the three Johannine epistles. The revelatory hermeneutic becomes a way to thematically consider the cultural exigence of the churches that comprised this tradition of Christian faith. Apart from the letters to the seven churches in Revelation, it is here we learn what this community identified as its core commitments and the issue with which it struggled: how to negotiate the tension of Christ’s humanity and divinity, its response to those who did not share its God-centered worldview, the role of leaders in sustaining the integrity of a faithful response, etc. Boring argues that these are issues the church still faces: how is the church called to be faithful in a pluralistic world, especially when there is fragmentation within Christian expressions of faith and disputes about what constitutes a relevant Christology?

Only in chapter 4 does Boring bring his readers into the Johannine world with which we who preach and teach are most familiar. The reader of *Hearing John’s Voice* who has journeyed to this point is now prepared to experience the story of Jesus through the images and framework of this apocalyptic community’s understanding of a victorious Christ and a God who helms the “mission control of the universe” (Rev 4–5). How readers are to understand the story of this Gospel is first framed by the faith testimony of this community in its great Christological affirmation (1:1–18). The remainder of the Gospel is then considered in its two halves: the *triumphal* entry and presence of the Incarnate Word who engages and confronts the world (1:19–12:50) and the *triumphant* departure and return of the Incarnate Word who overcomes the world (13:1–21:25).

Homileticians might consider teaching an advanced preaching course in which this homiletic hermeneutic helps shape the message preached from each genre of the Johannine tradition. *Hearing John’s Voice* should be on the shelf of any preacher who would seek to shape a sermonic appeal that is aligned with the appeal of the text, for only an immersion in this world of Johannine thought can help the preacher or teacher imagine what faithfulness to this community’s Christ might be. In this way a preacher or teacher can hope to speak to the heart and call forth faith in a way that is faithful to the tradition of faith that has been handed down to us in these sacred texts.

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