

# **Romans: The Good News of God**

## **The Priority of Preaching**

*Romans 3:1-2*

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# The Priority of Preaching

## Scripture

When you think of a church's priority, what comes to mind?

We live in a day in which there is a lot of confusion over this question. Many churches are a reflection of our society which has become satiated with entertainment. Neil Postman, in his profound book titled, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, wrote, "Toward the end of the nineteenth century . . . the Age of Exposition began to pass, and the early signs of its replacement could be discerned. Its replacement was to be the Age of Show Business."<sup>1</sup>

In show business, truth is irrelevant; what really matters is whether we are entertained. Substance counts for little; *style* is everything. In the words of Marshall McLuhan, the medium is the message.

And unfortunately, that kind of thinking now rules the church as surely as it does the world.

One of the most bizarre examples of a well-known church confused about its role in the world came from a May 13, 1991 article in *The Wall Street Journal*. The article described the church's attempt "to perk up attendance at Sunday evening services." The church "staged a wrestling match, featuring church employees. To train for the event, 10 game employees got lessons from Tugboat Taylor, a former professional wrestler, in pulling hair, kicking shins and tossing bodies around without doing real harm."<sup>2</sup> As pastor John MacArthur noted, "No harm done to the staff members, perhaps, but what is the effect of such an exhibition on the church's message?"<sup>3</sup>

That wrestling match is not an obscure example from an ec-

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1985), 63.

<sup>2</sup> R. Gustav Niebuhr, "Mighty Fortresses: Megachurches Strive to Be All Things to All Parishioners," *The Wall Street Journal* (13 May 1991), A6.

<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 69.

centric church on the fringe. It took place in the Sunday evening service of one of America's five largest churches. Similar examples could be drawn from other leading churches supposedly in the mainstream of evangelical orthodoxy.

Some maintain that if biblical principles are presented, the medium doesn't matter. That's nonsense. If an entertainment medium is the key to winning people to Christ and building them up in the faith, why not go all out? Why not have a real carnival? Why not have a tattooed acrobat on a high wire who could juggle chain saws and shout Bible verses while a trick dog balanced on his head? That would draw a crowd. And the *content* of the message would still be biblical! It's a bizarre scenario, but one that illustrates how the medium could cheapen and corrupt the message.

Sadly, that's not terribly different from what is actually being done in some churches. There seems to be almost no limit to what modern church leaders will do to entice people who are not interested in the church. Too many have bought the notion that church must win the lost and build up the faithful by offering an alternative form of entertainment.

I could go on with many similar examples, but I must stop. What should the church's priority be? Well, there are many priorities, but I would like to highlight one. This priority comes from the Apostle Paul in Romans 3:1-2. Let's read Romans 3:1-2:

**What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? <sup>2</sup> Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God. (Romans 3:1-2)**

## Introduction

In Romans 3:2, in what seems almost to be an incidental reference, the Apostle Paul uses a term for the Bible that ascribes to it the highest possible authority. In the *New International Version* the term is rendered in English as **“the very words”** of God. In Greek

this important word is *logia*. It was the possession of these **words** that constituted the chief advantage for the Jew.

## Lesson

Today, I want us to us to examine what it means to be entrusted with the **very words of God**, not from the perspective of its *possession* but from the perspective of its *proclamation*. To that end, I want us to see the priority of preaching in the church of Jesus Christ.

### I. The Priority of Preaching in the Ministry of Jesus

First, let's look at the priority of preaching in the ministry of Jesus.

At the very outset of his ministry, Matthew says that "Jesus *began to preach*, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'" (Matthew 4:17).

Mark records that "after John [the Baptist] was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, *proclaiming* the good news of God" (Mark 1:14).

And in Luke 4:43 Jesus said, "*I must preach* the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent." And then Luke adds, "And *he kept on preaching* in the synagogues of Judea" (Luke 4:44).

Throughout his ministry, Jesus continued to preach and teach (cf. Matthew 11:1; Mark 1:38-39; Luke 8:1; 20:1).

Luke gives us further insight into our Lord's own view of his ministry in Luke 4:18-19, where Jesus read Isaiah 61:1-2, and said:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to *preach* good news to the poor. He has sent me to *proclaim* freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to *proclaim* the year of the Lord's favor."

Preaching or proclaiming is mentioned three times in this passage from Isaiah that Jesus read. That clearly shows the importance of preaching in the ministry of Jesus. And then he demonstrated this priority in his own life by his example of making preaching and teaching preeminent in his ministry.

## **II. The Priority of Preaching in the Ministry of the Apostles and Disciples**

Second, notice the priority of preaching in the ministry of the apostles and disciples. The first-century church's emphasis on preaching reflected the priority of Jesus.

The first event in the life of the first-century church, following the coming of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, was Peter's sermon. It led to 3,000 conversions and launched the New Testament church (cf. Acts 2:41).

The book of Acts is largely the record of apostolic preaching. In fact, 25% of the book of Acts consists of sermons and significant speeches. No fewer than 19 significant speeches and sermons occur in the book of Acts.

Acts 4:2 records the displeasure of the Jewish officials that the apostles "were *teaching* the people and *proclaiming* in Jesus the resurrection of the dead." Undaunted, "day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped *teaching* and *proclaiming* the good news that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 5:42).

The priority of preaching in the first-century church is seen in how the apostles handled the difficulty that arose when the Greek-speaking Jews complained that the Aramaic-speaking Jews were overlooking their widows in the daily distribution of food. The Twelve apostles had the people elect what we now call Deacons in order to handle the physical and service aspects of the ministry. Why? So that the Twelve could give their attention "to prayer and the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4).

The book of Acts also tells us that after the first great perse-

cution of the church broke out, “those who had been scattered *preached* the word wherever they went” (Acts 8:4).

After his conversion, Paul immediately “began to *preach* in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20).

All the way to the very last verse, Acts records again and again how the first-century church “continued to *preach* the good news” of the gospel (Acts 14:7; cf. 10:42; 13:5, 32; 14:15, 21; 15:35; 16:10; 17:3, 13; 20:25; 28:31).

The mandate to preach and the priority of preaching came from Jesus himself. During his earthly ministry Jesus instructed his disciples, “As you go, preach” (Matthew 10:7). And after his resurrection, in his Great Commission, he said, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15).

This call to preach is best summed up in the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:17a: “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.”

It is clear that preaching drove the ministry of the first-century apostles and disciples. Preaching, that is, the faithful proclamation and exposition of the Word of God, has always been central to the church’s mission.

### **III. The Priority of Preaching in the Ministry of the Church Fathers**

Third, we see the priority of preaching in the ministry of the Church Fathers. Preaching has rightly held that central place in the life of the true church throughout the ages.

About the middle of the second century Justin Martyr’s *First Apology* was published. He addressed it to the Emperor, defending Christianity against misrepresentation, and argued that it is true because the Christ who died and rose was the embodiment of truth and the Savior of mankind. Towards the end he gave an account of the “weekly worship of the Christians.” It is notable both for the prominence given to the reading and preaching of the Scriptures, and for the combination of the Word and sacrament:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen.<sup>4</sup>

Another Church Father was John Chrysostom, or John “Golden Mouth,” so called because of his gift as a preacher of the Word of God. He preached for twelve years in the Cathedral in Antioch before becoming Bishop of Constantinople in 398 A.D. In an exposition of Ephesians 6:13 (“Therefore put on the full armor of God. . .”), he voiced his convictions about the unique importance of preaching. Like our human body, he said, the Body of Christ is subject to many diseases. Medicines, correct diet, suitable climate and adequate sleep all help to restore our physical health. But how shall Christ’s Body be healed?

One only means and one way of cure has been given us. . . and that is teaching of the Word. This is the best instrument, this the best climate; this serves instead of medicine, this serves instead of cautery and cutting; whether it be needful to burn or to amputate, this one method must be used; and without it nothing else will avail.<sup>5</sup>

#### **IV. The Priority of Preaching in the Ministry of the Reformers**

Fourth, we see the priority of preaching in the ministry of the Reformers.

The Reformation, which recovered biblical truth, was initi-

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<sup>4</sup> Justin Martyr, Chapter XXXIX, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, 46.

<sup>5</sup> Fant and Pinson, Vol. I, 108-9.

ated and spread largely through the revival of preaching by men like Martin Luther and John Calvin.

Luther emphasized that the Word of God is indispensable for our spiritual lives. “The soul can do without all things except the Word of God,” he said, “. . . if it is the Word it is rich and lacks nothing, since this Word is the Word of life, of truth, of light, of peace, of righteousness, of salvation, of joy, of liberty.” This is so because the Word centers on Christ. Hence he stressed the necessity of preaching Christ from the Word, “for to preach Christ means to feed the soul, to make it righteous, to set it free and to save it, if it believe the preaching.”<sup>6</sup> Luther believed that since the health of the Christian and of the Church depends on the Word of God, the preaching and teaching of it is both “the most important part of the divine service” and the “highest and only duty and obligation” of every bishop, pastor and preacher.<sup>7</sup>

John Calvin was the other leading figure in the Reformation. He too exalted the Word of God. In particular, he emphasized that the first and major mark of a true Church was the faithful preaching of the Word. “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard,” he wrote, “and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a Church of God exists.” In fact, this ministry of Word and sacrament, the audible and visible proclamation of the gospel, must be adjudged “a perpetual token by which to distinguish the Church.”<sup>8</sup>

One of the English Reformers was a man named Hugh Latimer. Born about 1485 as the son of a farmer in Leicestershire, and consecrated Bishop of Worcester in 1535, he never became prelatric or lost his down-to-earth touch. Instead, it was said of him that he spoke *from* the heart, and his words went *to* the heart.

His great burden was that the people of England were still lost in spiritual darkness, and that the clergy were to blame for this

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<sup>6</sup> Luther, *Of the Liberty of a Christian Man*, in Rupp, 87.

<sup>7</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 24.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, IV, I.9 and 2.1, 1023 and 1041.



because they neglected the ministry of the Word of God. Especially blameworthy were the bishops. They were so taken up, he said, with “ruffling in their rents, dancing in their dominions. . . munching in their mangers, and moiling in their gay manors and mansions” that they had no time for preaching.

Latimer’s best known—and perhaps most powerful—sermon is known as “The Sermon of the Plough,” and was preached in St. Paul’s Cathedral on January 18, 1548, soon after he had been released from his incarceration in the Tower of London. His theme was that “God’s Word is seed to be sown in God’s field” and that “the preacher is the sower.” As he developed his theme, he drew on his personal experience of farming on his father’s Leicestershire estate. The preacher, he argued, should be like the ploughman, because he should “labor at all seasons of the year.” But he bewailed the fact that instead preachers spent their time meddling in business and pleasure. As a result, “by the lording and loitering, preaching and plowing is clean gone.” Then Latimer kept his hearers in suspense by this famous passage:

And now I would ask you a strange question; who is the most diligent bishop and prelate in all England; that passes all the rest in doing his office? I can tell, for I know who it is; I know him well. But now I think I see you listening and hearkening that I should name him. There is one that passes all the others, and is the most diligent prelate and preacher in all England. And will ye know who it is? I will tell you—it is the Devil. He is the most diligent preacher of all others; he is never out of his diocese; he is never from his cure; you shall never find him unoccupied; he is ever in his parish; he keeps residence at all times; you shall never find him out of the way; call for him when you will, he is ever at home. He is the most diligent preacher in all the realm; he is ever at his plough; no lording or loitering can hinder him; he is ever applying his business; you shall never find him idle, I warrant you. . . Where the devil is resident, and has his plough going, there away with books and up with candles; away with Bibles and up with beads; away with the light of the gospel and up with the light of candles, yea, at noonday; . . . up with man’s traditions and his

laws, down with God's traditions and his most holy word; . . . Oh that our prelates would be as diligent to sow the corn of good doctrine as Satan is to sow cockle and darnel! . . . There was never such a preacher in England as he is.<sup>9</sup>

## **V. The Priority of Preaching in the Ministry of the Puritans**

Fifth, we see the priority of preaching in the ministry of the Puritans.

Perhaps no era in the history of the Christian church has enjoyed such power as the era of the Puritans in the seventeenth century. No era produced so many powerful preachers and no era has produced such a powerful church. Why such a powerful church? Author Irvonwy Morgan says:

The essential thing in understanding the Puritans was that they were preachers before they were anything else, and preachers with a particular emphasis that could be distinguished from other preachers by those who heard them. . . What bound them together, undergirded their striving, and gave them the dynamic to persist was their consciousness that they were called to preach the Gospel. "Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel" was their inspiration and justification. Puritan tradition in the first and last resort must be assessed in terms of the pulpit, and the words of the ex-Dominican Friar Thomas Sampson, one of the leaders and first sufferers of the Puritan Movement . . . can stand as their slogan: "Let others be Bishops," he says, "I will undertake the office of preacher or none at all."<sup>10</sup>

## **VI. The Priority of Preaching in the Ministry of the Post-Puritans**

And finally, we see the priority of preaching in the post-Puritans.

Even though the Puritans represented the zenith of preaching

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<sup>9</sup> *Works of Hugh Latimer*, Vol. I, 59-78.

<sup>10</sup> Morgan, I., *Godly Preachers*, 10, 11.

in the Christian church, there have been many since then who have been committed to the priority of the Word of God.

Let me give you just one example from one of my favorite preachers, George Whitefield. Although John Wesley has become better known to us than his younger contemporary George Whitefield (probably because of the world-wide denomination that bears Wesley's name), Whitefield was actually the more powerful and better known preacher in his day. In Britain and in America (which he visited seven times), indoors and out of doors, he averaged about twenty sermons a week for thirty-four years. Eloquent, zealous, dogmatic, passionate, he enlivened his preaching with vivid metaphors, pointed illustrations and dramatic gestures. By these he would hold his audiences spellbound, as he either addressed direct questions to them or begged them earnestly to be reconciled with God. He had complete confidence in the authority of his message, and was determined that it should receive the respect it deserved as God's Word. Once in a New Jersey meeting house he "noticed an old man settling down for his accustomed, sermon-time nap," writes John Pollock, one of his biographers. Whitefield began his sermon quietly, without disturbing the gentleman's sleep. But then "in measured, deliberate words" he said:

"If I had come to speak to you in my own name, you might rest your elbows upon your knees and your heads on your hands, and go to sleep! . . . But I have come to you in the name of the Lord God of hosts, and (he clapped his hands and stamped his foot) I *must* and I *will* be heard." The old man woke up startled.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

We have been entrusted with the **very words of God**. Cherish the Word of God, not only as you read and study it yourself, but also as you hear it preached. Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> Pollock, *George Whitefield*, 248.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons)
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributor\\_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributor_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181)
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**PRAAYER:**

O Lord our God, thank you that we have been entrusted with the very words of God. We thank you that we have the Bible as our possession to read and study for ourselves.

I pray that you will ensure this church to maintain the priority of preaching. We have seen how the church, when it has been strong and true and pure, has always maintained the priority of preaching your Word to your people. May we never ignore or neglect the preaching of your Word in our lives and in our church.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.