

Living in God's Church Today

Preach the Word

2 Timothy 4:1-2

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Introduction

When you think of the 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."¹

In show business, truth is irrelevant; what 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 being 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."²

No harm was done to the staff members, perhaps, but

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

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

what kind of damage was being done to the church of Jesus?

That wrestling match is not an obscure example from an eccentric 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 chainsaws 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 very different from what is 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 the 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.

So, what should be the church's priority? Well, a church may do many good things, but I would like to highlight one. This priority comes from the apostle Paul who was writing to young Timothy and giving him instructions for the priority he was to focus on.

Scripture

Listen to Paul's instruction in 2 Timothy 4:1-2:

¹ I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. (2 Timothy 4:1-2)

Lesson

Today, I want to focus on the priority of preaching in the church of Jesus Christ. My purpose today is not to do an exposition of these verses, but simply to focus our attention briefly on the phrase in verse 2a: **“Preach the word.”**

Most pastors want to see their churches grow. Some pastors are committed to the priority of preaching the word of God. However, I am also aware that other pastors are tempted to try something new and snazzy and different.

Years ago I read a book by David Eby titled, *Power Preaching for Church Growth*. Pastor Eby was the pastor of North City PCA in San Diego at the time. He noted that from 1972 to 1996 there were 334 books written on church growth. He said:

The astounding thing is that books on church growth say so little about preaching. . . . Instead of finding mounds of sparkling nuggets on the role and priority of preaching in church growth, I have panned only a handful of low-grade gold dust—a brief comment here, a passing assertion there, with an anecdote or illustration occasionally. Experts writing to fill the eager ears of pastors and church leaders with advice on how churches grow, apparently consider preaching to be of secondary importance in the process.³

³ David Eby, *Power Preaching for Church Growth: The Role of Preaching in Growing Churches* (Fearn, Christian Focus Publications, 1996), 9.

So I bring this message today to exhort us to continue focusing on the priority of preaching.

I. The Priority of Preaching in the Ministry of Jesus

First, I want you to notice the priority of preaching in the ministry of Jesus.

At the very outset of his ministry, Matthew says that “Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ ” (Matthew 4:17).

Mark records that “after John [the Baptist] was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God” (Mark 1:14). Later, Mark notes that Jesus rose early in the morning to spend time with his Father in prayer. Simon Peter and the others found Jesus and told him, “Everyone is looking for you.” And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out” (Mark 1:38).

In Luke 4:43, Jesus said, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.” And then Luke adds, “And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea” (Luke 4:44, *NIV*).

Throughout his ministry, Jesus continued to preach the word of God (*cf.* Matthew 11:1; Mark 1:38-39; Luke 8:1; 20:1).

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

Second, we see the priority of preaching in the ministry of the apostles and disciples. The first-century church’s emphasis on preaching reflected that same emphasis of our Lord.

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 sermons and significant speeches 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 from the dead." Undaunted, "every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as 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 against the Aramaic-speaking Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. The Twelve apostles had the people elect what we now call Deacons to handle the physical aspects of the ministry. Why? So that the Twelve could give their attention "to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4).

After the first great persecution of the church broke out, "those who were scattered went about preaching the word" (Acts 8:4).

After his conversion, Paul immediately "proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God'" (Acts 9:20).

To the very last verse, the book of Acts records again and again how the first-century church "continued to preach 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).

It is clear that preaching drove the ministry of the first-century apostles and disciples. Preaching, that is, the faithful

proclamation, exposition, and application of the word of God has always been the central priority of 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.

In 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. Toward 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.⁴

Another Church Father was John Chrysostom, or John

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

“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 take up the whole 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, a correct diet, a suitable climate, and adequate sleep all help to restore our physical health. But how shall Christ’s Body be healed? Here is Chrysostom’s answer:

One only means and one way of cure has been given to us... and that is the 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.⁵

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

And fourth, notice the priority of preaching in the ministry of the Reformers.

The Reformation, which recovered biblical truth, was initiated and spread largely through the revival of preaching by men like Martin Luther. Luther emphasized that the word of God is indispensable for our spiritual life. “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

⁵ Fant and Pinson, Vol. I, 108-9.

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 believes the preaching.”⁶

Luther believed that since the health of the Christian and 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.⁷

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.”⁸

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 prelatie or lost his homely, rustic 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

⁶ Luther, *Of the Liberty of a Christian Man*, in Rupp, 87.

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

⁸ Calvin, IV, I.9 and 2.1, 1023 and 1041.

lost in spiritual darkness and that the clergy were to blame for this because they neglected the ministry of the word of God. Specially 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 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 “labour 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 ploughing are clean gone.” Then Latimer kept his hearers in suspense with 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 see 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 darnell!... There was never such a preacher in England as he is.⁹

Conclusion

I could easily go on. Suffice it to say that preaching has been a priority for more than 2,000 years.

A godly man, gifted by the Spirit of God to preach the word of God, has no equal in the presentation of the truth of God. Preaching is the primary, God-ordained means for evangelism and edification. The weakness of so many of our contemporary churches today is largely due to the decline in powerful, biblical preaching.

Brothers and sisters, what should be the church's highest priority?

I submit to you that it must be the preaching of the word of God.

So, let us hear the word of God, believe the word of God, and apply the word of God as it is proclaimed week by week from the pulpit of this church. And we will glorify God and grow in the knowledge and grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

⁹ *Works of Hugh Latimer*, Vol. I, 59-78.

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

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