

WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT PREACHING?

Inaugural EMA Address on Preaching
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This year the Proclamation Trust is 20 years old--though the preaching conferences go back a good deal earlier—and the EMA itself pre-dates it by 3 years. We are fundamentally a single-issue concern, “Preach the Word”. All our ministry is designed for the well-being of the Church and the spread of the gospel throughout the world, by encouraging, enabling and equipping pastor/teachers to keep at this central task, to make it their main commitment, their life work—to do it faithfully and to keep on keeping on, to pursue excellence in the work and to allow nothing to divert them from this greatest of all privileges and responsibilities: Preach the Word! The Word is the content and preaching is what we do with it. In the goodness of God ministries have been changed, pulpits have been re-won for the exposition of Scripture and the preaching of the gospel, a new generation of devoted Biblical ministers has begun to emerge and its numbers and competence seem to be growing. For all of this we should stop and praise God—to Him be the glory—and we should surely be thankful for our fellowship, opportunities and

is not passé, and if Scripture and experience both point to the continuing centrality of Biblical proclamation, how can we ensure that God’s purposes for preaching are being fulfilled in what we are doing? For if it is probably true that good preaching may not easily fill a church these days, it is undeniably true that poor preaching will easily empty it!

Let’s read Luke 4:16-32. It establishes that the Lord Jesus was an expository preacher. He chooses a text from Isaiah 61 which focuses his ministry by repeating the verb “to proclaim” (which is mentioned 3 times in verses 18-19):

“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 favour.”

This also identifies his person as the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy (v21: *and he began by saying*

“The grand design and intention of the office of a Christian preacher [is] to restore the throne and dominion of God in the hearts of men” (Cotton Mather)

resources. And yet...we are barely holding our own. For every pulpit won, another seems to be lost, not necessarily to heresy, but to the Bible being relegated from the driving-seat to the passenger seat, where it makes a useful companion, a map to be consulted from time to time, but does not really determine the direction of the car. For every new church plant, another faithful, evangelical church is in terminal decline. For every zealous young pastor, there is a wounded, discouraged, exhausted and quietly despairing older brother. For every growing church staff in the wealthy areas, there are single-handed brothers in less affluent parts of the country who, as one shared with me the other day, cannot even afford a secretary to help with his administration one day a week.

Are we really right to be so obsessional about Biblical preaching? Or are we just hankering after a by-gone age? And if the spoken word

to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”). Here is Christ preaching Christ from Old Testament Scripture. But Jesus not only interprets Isaiah, he also interprets the Nazareth congregation. It’s as though the sermon is like an ellipse with twin focal points—the Biblical text and the condition or situation of the hearers. There is a particular Nazarene focus and application, which Jesus introduces by his use of one of their contemporary proverbs (v23: *Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’”*). At one level the message is received so well (v22a: *“All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips”*.) but at the deeper level it is profoundly rejected (v22b: *“‘Isn’t this Joseph’s son?’ they asked.”*). So Scripture is used to interpret Scripture. 1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 5 are brought into play to interpret their reaction to

Isaiah's proclamation (an observed Biblical pattern which explains the present)—and so the unbelief of their hearts is laid bare, with very predictable consequences (v28-29: *All the people in the synagogue were furious when "they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way."*). A successful sermon? Drummed out of town? Oh yes, totally effective (v31-32: *"Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people. They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority."*). That authority had been proclaimed—and in Nazareth hearts were hardened, just as some in Capernaum began to soften. Faithful teaching ministries harden as well as soften hearts. This is why well-taught churches can seem suddenly to collapse when a faithful ministry comes to an end. There has been tacit resistance alongside positive acceptance. Now do you see how this cuts right across so many of our presuppositions about the preaching task and how it exposes the alarming extent of our cultural accommodation as 21st century preachers?

I want to suggest that we need to carry out a virus check, to see where our own thinking is less than Biblical, and why that affects our practice so deeply. Look back over the past 3 months. Does your diary reflect your affirmed priorities? We all know we are called to the ministry of the Word and to prayer. We call our people to it as the heart of their daily devotion to the Lord—but are they not often the hardest things actually to prioritize in our busy, busy lives? Now I'm not here either to initiate a guilt-trip, or to pretend that we should be untroubled by such pressures. But I do want us to be realists and explore why the priorities to which we give lip-service so often get squeezed out of that position in practice. How much time do we spend in preparation and in prayer? And how do you use it? There are powerful issues at work in the culture and in the church and I think it may be helpful to take a few moments to step back and look at ourselves, our time and our energy, what they are spent on, and why, and what returns are we getting? What are the perhaps unrecognised presuppositions on which we are actually building our ministries?

I. In the culture.

Of course there is nothing new under the sun. 414 years ago a book was published by William Perkins entitled "The Art of Prophesying" ("Preaching" we would say). In it, Perkins lamented the scarcity of true Biblical ministers, a truth, he says, which is self-evident from the experience of all ages. He laments that few men of quality seek the calling of the ministry and even says that of those with the title very few deserve the honourable names of messenger (angel) and interpreter. And he traces this to 3 causes:-

- i.) The contempt with which the calling is treated—Biblical ministry is hated by the world because it reveals sin and unmasks hypocrisy.
- ii.) The difficulty of discharging the duties—the care and charge of souls, to be the one who speaks to God on behalf of the people and to the people on behalf of God is an overwhelming responsibility.
- iii.) The inadequacy of financial recompense and status. Who would accept the contempt and the difficulties for such a poor reward? Instead, Perkins says, the sharpest minds of our day turn to the law. And that was in 1592!

But while we are not unique in 2006, we do have particular cultural pressures at work, as the world seeks to squeeze us into its mould and is often subtly successful in ways we hardly realise, let alone admit. Where the Reformation regarded preaching as "the source and spring of Christian faith", now it is marginalized and then rejected. The arguments may be familiar, but important because the virus is highly contagious and it very readily lurks in our sub-conscious minds.

i) Preaching is presumptuous – in an age when the Church is no longer central to the fabric of society and has lost its credibility. For one person to instruct others about matters of belief or behaviour is unwarranted arrogance ("Don't preach at me!"). It smacks of the pompous, the self-important. In a culture which finds it hard to cope with seriousness, there is a distaste and distrust of anything which sounds earnest.

ii) So, preaching is naïve – because there is no Truth, only many individual stories. Advertising/marketing has destroyed the credibility of testimony. Would you buy double glazing on your doorstep? How do we know that Christian opinion hasn't been produced by manipulation? How can the same old Biblical agenda be relevant to our world of revolutionary development and change? Preaching only addresses one of our senses—hearing. It follows a limited linear mode of thought—it lacks immediacy.

iii) Preaching is ineffective – Most of the congregation cannot reproduce accurately the contents of a sermon even immediately afterwards. It is lacking in reciprocity/dialogue. There are the inevitable limitations of one person's point of view, even with Power Point! Preaching is an introverted activity; it privatizes religion. And it is frequently boring, which raises questions about the commitment and integrity of the preacher. If he's boring me, he is probably boring himself. Does he believe and live what he proclaims? Does he live in the house of his dogmas? Where is his own centre of gravity?

Arguments like these chip away constantly at our confidence as preachers. Totally focussed on human wisdom and criteria—God is left out! The virus spreads through the system.

And so the church itself propagates their development, in its structures and accepted norms, which constitute a downgrading of preaching. We shall find these much harder to identify and accept because we have become so used to them.

II. In the church

i.) A downgrading of expectation.

There is a “Spurgeon story” that when he was approached by a young preacher who complained of his own comparative ineffectiveness, he asked him, “Do you really expect God to work every time you preach?” The young man replied, “Oh no! Of course not!” Spurgeon answered, “That is why nothing happens!”

“Do you really expect...” I wonder if we have so over-reacted to the mystical and the subjective-emotional in preaching, that we see it now in terms of dispensing Biblical knowledge rather than pleading with God in prayer and men in proclamation to change lives in time for eternity. “Preach the Word” has become “Explain the Bible”. There is a difference. Systematic theology is essential. Biblical theology in the whole sweep of the Bible’s big picture from Genesis to Revelation, in Kingdom and covenant, is deeply enriching. But they are not the way God wrote the Bible and to let them govern the sermon, rather than the text of Scripture as written is to end up speaking about the Bible rather than letting the Bible speak. One is the words of men; the other the Word of God. Not observing the text, but listening to God; not cool analysts, but passionate hearers.

Perhaps there is a confusion here between the church and the academy. The better the preacher’s theological training—and we thank God for the splendid developments in this area over the last 20 years or so—the more he is likely to want to emulate the seminary in the pulpit, and to want the church to be a sort of Christian university. Let me trace this through a little because I think it’s a real issue. We tend to quote 2 Tim 2:2, “*What you have heard from me entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also*” and apply it to the man of God, the pastor-teacher and his congregation. But I had a very stimulating conversation with Dr Mervyn Eloff in South Africa a few months ago, where he suggested that Timothy might be an example of the apostolic delegate, rather than a model of the local church pastor-teacher, or elder. Timothy’s task would then be to raise up pastor-teachers, to discover and train them, and that would in turn be part of their task, perhaps. But that is not the primary focus of the local church. If we want to see Paul spelling that out, it’s in Acts 20 to the Ephesian elders as he passes on the baton of local church leadership in these terms, “*Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock...be shepherds of the church of God*” (v28) and we know from the Lord Jesus himself that this means feeding his sheep and tending the flock (John 21). The origin of these instructions goes right back to Ezekiel 34 where (1)

Yahweh condemns the shepherds who think the flock exists for them (v2); (2) Yahweh himself decrees “*I will seek out my sheep...I will rescue them...I will feed them with good pasture...I will bring back the strayed...bind up the injured...strengthen the weak*” -- that is Christ’s ministry; that is the pastor’s task, through his Word ministry. We certainly want to lift the level of training in our churches, but that isn’t what the church is for. It’s a subtle difference. The field hospital is a more Biblical model than the university seminar rooms, but it is still the Word that does the work. We would be in danger of seeing the church as the focus for ministry practice, so that the training agenda dominates everything else.

This might account for the common complaint that well-trained evangelical preachers are often boring, or that what is said from the pulpit doesn’t connect with real life, or that we are “not being fed”, in the sense of being helped to live effective Christian lives. Now it could be argued that if we have small group Bible studies, or develop one-on-one discipleship training ministries (both of which are excellent, of course) we don’t need preaching so much, especially pastoral preaching. People will be taught the Bible in their groups. However, in practice this is to put a huge load on the comparatively untrained shoulders of the group leaders, however well we may try to equip them. In many churches, the leader is not expected to fulfil a leadership teaching role—more the chair of a discussion without any significant authority. In others there is a lack of theological acumen and pastoral wisdom, which means the discussion is severely limited, and people’s questions are often dismissed as irrelevant diversions, red herrings. Some groups become a pooling of ignorance and others processing and formulaic. The answer lies in the preaching, which can and should achieve so much more than the best trained home groups, for these reasons:

- 1) The messenger has been trained and equipped to preach;
- 2) The whole congregation is addressed so that the corporate content of Scripture is heard by them as a community;
- 3) The church is therefore led from the pulpit by the proclamation of the Word.

ii.) A downgrading of the calling.

If our expectations of preaching are lowered, then the sense of the preacher being uniquely gifted and commissioned by God will tend to disappear with it. Because we are rightly suspicious of subjectivism, which sees a mystical authorization of ministry in special circumstances or verses called “a call”, we have tended to swing to the opposite extreme and imply that anyone of reasonable intelligence and godly inclination can “do ministry”. Of course we all

have a ministry to fulfil and in that sense every Christian is “in ministry”, but it is misleading to imagine that everyone can do everything. The charismata of the New Testament are giftings from God himself and there does need to be objective attestation to their existence, coupled with an inner constraint of the Holy Spirit that this is the work God has given me to do. This is what constitutes “the call”, which I believe is needed for full-time ministry—and it would seem that aptness to teach is one of the essential ingredients.

If we take this seriously, it will mean that the person and work of the Holy Spirit is absolutely central to the task. If the gifts of Word ministry are “*empowered by the one Spirit who ap- portions to each one individually as he wills*” (1 Cor 12:11), then those whom he has not gifted will not know his empowering in that area.

This has important implications for the many ministry schemes and apprenticeship schemes, which we rejoice to see multiplying around the country. There is perhaps a danger that they can produce a conveyor-belt, by which a young graduate can move to church leadership and ordination, without there ever being a real assessment of his ability and giftedness as a preacher. Because the needs are great and we want to multiply the work- force greatly, we may be tempted to cut corners and assume that everyone who can do personal work and lead a group Bible study well should be “in ministry”. But Matthew 9:38 does remind us, “*Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.*” It is his harvest, not ours. Only he can gift and equip effective labourers. We may send people out to do a job, but are they actually the chief harvesters’ workforce? This is a very important issue for the future health and welfare of our congregations.

Biblical knowledge may be conveyed faithfully and engagingly, but what will be lacking is an encounter with the living God. And where the gifting is present, there will still need to be a deep dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit in answer to prayer, to quicken the dead and to edify the saints, to convince, instruct, rebuke and correct. So we say to ourselves as we climb the pulpit steps, “I believe in the Holy Spirit...”

That priority is reflected by:

1. prayer in the preparation (for clarity, faith-fulness and relevant application);
2. prayer for the proclamation (the exposition and structure); and
3. prayer for the congregation (a love for peo- ple, asking ourselves, “What must I preach from this passage to them?”).

As Jesus reminded his disciples, “*Without me, you can do nothing.*” (John 15:5)

You can preach a sermon and get by—even be

approved and applauded but the eternal yield is nothing. God’s most effective method of reach- ing the whole congregation with the life-changing Word is effectively neutralized, if we are not to- tally dependent on the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Preaching is central to this calling, as it was in Christ’s own ministry, from whom all au- thentic ministry is derived. In Karl Barth’s defi- nition in his “Homiletics”, “Preaching is the at- tempt enjoined upon the Church to serve God’s own Word, through one who is called thereto, by expounding a Biblical text in human words and making it relevant to contemporaries, in intima- tion of what they have to hear from God Himself.”

iii.) A downgrading of the preacher.

By this I mean that there are strong pressures to see preaching as “one of the things I do”, in ministry, but not its heart-beat, not its indispensable core. The argument runs like this: “I’m not especially gifted as a preacher. Others can do it much better than I can and anyway all the study that is required demands a price, in terms of time, that I can’t af- ford. So I’ll go to one of the websites, download a really good sermon, tweak it a bit with an illus- tration or two and make it my own.” Nothing new under the sun. Do you know that old limerick,

*There once was a preacher called Spurgy
who had little time for liturgy
but his sermons are fine
so I use them as mine
and so do the rest of the clergy?*

So what’s wrong with that? A great deal! The Word isn’t in the preacher, because the preacher isn’t in the Word—and instead of heart-to-heart proclamation, you have a ministry of perform- ance. The actor – the mask – the hypocrite. All very much culturally approved and appreciated, but barren of the power and presence of God.

Listen to Calvin preaching in Sermon XXII on 1 Tim 3:2 “apt to teach”:

“For St Paul does not mean that one should just make a parade here or that a man should show off so that everyone applauds him and says ‘Oh! Well-spoken! Oh! What a breadth of learn- ing! Oh! What a subtle mind!’ All that is be- side the point... When a man has climbed up into the pulpit, is it so that he may be seen from afar, and that he may be pre-eminent? Not at all. It is that God may speak to us by the mouth of a man.”

(THL Parker, “Calvin’s Preaching”, (Westminster/ John Knox 1992 p.24)

Do we have a high enough view of the office of the preacher (not of ourselves)? Do we still tremble at the awesome responsibil- ity of the task—so few minutes to preach, invest- ed with such eternal potential, for gain or loss?

Calvin again:

“It is certain that if we come to church we shall not hear only a mortal man speaking but we shall feel (even by his (God’s) secret power) that God is speaking to our souls, that he is the teacher. He so touches us that the human voice enters into us and so profits us that we are refreshed and nourished by it.”

(*Op. cit.*, p.42)

In his book, T.H.L. Parker concludes, from a wide trawl of the sermons and the Institutes, that there are 3 or 4 dominant aims in Calvin’s many references to the primacy of preaching: to honour God, to reform lives, to witness to truth and to present salvation. All this can be summed up in the one over-all concept of “edification”—with the New Testament sense of construction or building—with Christ himself as the one foundation.

So what is so special about preaching? What antibodies do we need to develop to ward off these crippling cultural infections? The New Testament has the answer. It is the result of preaching and is itself a form of preaching. Do you remember how Luke begins his Gospel with reference to “*those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants (ministers) of the Word*” (1:2)? The message communicated is the Word of the Lord and that is what gives birth to and lies at the heart of God’s covenant community. There are basic Biblical principles here of which we need to be 100% convinced. The community of God’s people is to meet together regularly, and not to neglect this primary means of grace (Heb 10:25). The roots of that go back to the origins of Israel. Where do you first find congregational preaching in Scripture? At the very formation of the nation.

The book of Exodus is central to Old Testament Scripture and is the essential primer in covenant theology. Central to the book is the redeemed nation gathered at Sinai; 19:1 – 24:11 is the controlling section. Their identity as a nation is forged as they are called together to listen to the voice of God in the 10 Words, to respond in obedience to their covenant Lord and to seal their agreement, with the blood of sacrifice, in the covenant ratification ceremony. Either side of the Law as given in chapters 20-23, there are sermons/preaching. In ch 19 Moses is given the Lord’s Word to preach to the people concerning the nature of his covenant grace in redemption, which creates their identity as God’s special possession (treasure-chest) and commits them to obey his voice and keep his covenant, so as to enter into all the blessings of the covenant mercy. In ch 24 after the giving of the Law, “*Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said ‘All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do’*” (24:3). The book of the covenant is written and then proclaimed as the fore-runner to the covenant ratification. Worshipping the LORD

means listening to his Word, with its declarations and explanations and then committing oneself to a life of trust and obedience, appropriating covenant grace to live distinctively different lives. This is the beginning of expository preaching. The Torah is not merely a code for determining sin and judging the wicked. It is much more the basis of guiding the righteous, expounding the way of life for God’s redeemed people which is in accordance with his character and will.

So it is hardly surprising that the book of Deuteronomy is a series of expository sermons preached on the Torah before the entry to the land. It is the establishment of a Biblical pattern, a pattern which continues with the Prophets, who are preachers of the Torah, to the specific circumstances of the covenant community in their day, and sometimes to the unbelieving world, through the Wisdom tradition and on into what became the post-exilic synagogues. Its pattern is confirmed by Nehemiah 8, where the reading and exposition of the Torah leads to repentance, worship and covenant renewal. And that became the established template for synagogue practice. A set lesson from the Torah and a lesson from the Prophets (chosen by the speaker, as did Jesus in Nazareth) and an exposition of the texts, understood throughout the inter-testamental period as the continuation of the prophetic ministry. That’s why the Council of Jerusalem concludes with James’ pronouncement in Acts 15:21, “*From ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues*”. Reading and proclamation of the Word are the central activity. It explains why Paul goes first to the synagogue and why apostolic preaching is regarded as God speaking: The Word of the LORD.

It is striking that this term “Word” which Paul and the other apostles are very happy to use about Old Testament revelation, they also appropriate to their own preaching. The Thessalonians received the word in much affliction, but it also came “*in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction*” (1 Thess 1:5-6). Indeed “*when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God*” (2:13). That’s the high status of apostolic preaching. The claim is profound. God himself speaks through the words of Paul. The word of God is a genitive of ownership, meaning that God’s voice is heard in the preaching of the apostles. But what about our preaching? Could we ever say that our preaching has that sort of authority—can it be an encounter with the living God? Of course, we are not to be equated with the unique apostolate who were eyewitnesses of the risen Lord and directly commissioned by him, even Paul “*as one untimely born*”. We believe because of their testimony. But does the fact that we are recipients of revelation (second-hand knowledge, if you like) mean that our preaching is only human words and bound therefore to be second-rate?

One interesting pointer is that Paul doesn't seem to differentiate between the quality, or authority, or effectiveness of his apostolic proclamation and the preaching of his fellow-workers. There are interesting hints. For example, 1 Cor 16:10: "*When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am.*" No apostolic differentiation in Word ministry. In 1 Thess 3:2 Timothy is "*our brother and God's co-worker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith*" – both evangelism and edification. In the pastorals and especially 2 Tim, he is passed the baton of ministry with the same priorities and practice Paul had. This is the true apostolic succession. That was what led the Reformers to affirm (2nd Helvetic Confession) "When Scripture is now preached in the Church by preachers lawfully called [those are the safeguards!] we believe that the very Word of God (ipsum dei verbum) is proclaimed and received by the faithful."

Attacked by rationalism (in the 18th century), liberalism (in the 19th century), scepticism (in the 20th century) and now postmodernism (in the 21st century) can we still have that sort of confidence in preaching? Yes, if the preacher is proclaiming the Word of God in Scripture. There the voice of God is truly heard. Its efficacy is neither determined nor limited by the spiritual or technical quality of the preacher. It is God who speaks through the lips of men, which means that Scripture is, in the phrase of H.O. Old, "the fixed norm for preaching, and exposition the only valid method". But the other ingredient, the other focal point of the ellipse is equally vital. It is not just repetition of Scripture or even careful exposition alone. It has, in Old's words, to be "actualized", skilfully and powerfully directed towards the hearers and their situations. "Congregations are not passive buckets to be pumped into" (Tillstrom). All good preaching is essentially dialogical—in two senses:

(a) between the preacher and the congregation so that what is said is weighed and tested; and

(b) but also between God and the people (including the preacher) so that what is heard is believed and obeyed and so the God who speaks is loved and worshipped.

As Jim Packer states: "The proper aim of preaching is to mediate meetings with God" (*J.I. Packer, Truth and Power (Eagle Publishing (1996)). See Chapter 5, Mouthpiece for God*). And in order for that to happen application needs to adhere (Jim Packer suggests) to 3 guidelines.

i) It should constantly focus on the unchanging realities of each person's relationship to God—including "faith, love, hope, obedience; humility, repentance, forgiveness, fidelity; thankful praise and trustful prayer; stewarding gifts, sanctifying one's activities, serving others and standing against evil in one's own heart and in the world outside." (*Op. cit., p.148*) It's about living a Christian life, walking with God.

ii) Application should constantly focus on the place and person of Jesus Christ:

"Jesus my Shepherd, Husband, Friend
my Prophet, Priest and King;
my Lord, my Life, my Way, my End."
(*Op. cit., p.149*)

iii) Application should constantly search the hearts and consciences of the hearers—it must "come home" in a penetrating way and personally to as many as possible in the congregation.

It is time to conclude. And to do that I ask you to open your Bible again and turn to Romans 10:8-17:

But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

"What does it [the righteousness based on faith from verse 6] say?" This is as much God's unchanging Word, for every generation, including ours, as is the magisterial exposition of the gospel in chs 1-8. The righteousness based on faith says that it is engendered by preaching—or rather that what God does in bringing men and women to new life he does in and through preaching. *Fideo ex auditu* (faith and hearing). This is the ever-present, always living Word of God in the gospel—on the lips in the confession that Jesus is Lord and in the heart in the belief that God raised him from the dead (v8-9). But Paul's point is that universal availability (v11-13) requires universal proclamation (v14). That sort of proclamation is divinely commissioned ("sent" v15). Not just individual Christian witness, but public proclamation of the whole counsel of God. The forward movement of the gospel, and the resultant growth and health of the Church does not depend on communication techniques, or rhetoric, or human wisdom or human power, not on mass psychology or clever marketing—it depends on the proclamation of the Truth,

in season and out of season, whether they will hear or not. God himself is reaching out to people in the faithful preaching of his Word and this is such a task as demands the whole life of the preacher—called, set apart, equipped, consecrated and sent out. It is a life of immense privilege, grounded in ongoing sacrifice. But verse 14 inexorably leads to v17. The inescapable implication is that Christ speaks in the proclamation of Scripture—and for the preacher that is both the most amazing privilege and the most overwhelming responsibility. That is why we give ourselves to the ministry of the Word and to prayer.

I close with a quote from John Piper’s excellent book “The Supremacy of God in Preaching” (*Baker Book House (1990)*). Cotton Mather, the New England puritan, said, “The great design and intention of the office of a Christian preacher [is] to restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men”. As John Piper comments, “The key question is: What does the preacher herald? What is the good news referred to here [Romans 10: 14-15]? Since verse 16 is a quotation of Isaiah 52:7, we do well to go back and let Isaiah define it for us... The good tidings of the preacher, the peace and salvation that he publishes, are boiled down into one sentence: “Your God Reigns!” Mather applies this, with full justification, to the preacher. “The great design ... of a Christian preacher [is] to restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men””

So, brothers, “Preach the Word!”