THE PUBLIC READING OF SCRIPTURE

Christopher K. Lensch

“Till I come, give attention to [public] reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.” – I Timothy 4:13

Introduction

True Christians have always been known as “People of the Book.” This historic identity shows how important truth, revealed truth, is to believing Christians. Other world religions may have their sacred writings, but they also have concomitant traditions that carry as much authority as their constitutional writings (e.g., Judaism adds the Talmud and Roman Catholicism adds the tradition of the fathers). Not so, biblical Christianity.

As our constitution, the Bible alone is the Christian’s guide for faith and practice. This book’s first emphasis is on what God has done in creation and redemptive history rather than merely serving as a manual on what we should do. His revelation is a window into His being and will, and then it is about how man, made in His image, should reflect His nature.

God’s self-communication through the Bible is His primary means of bringing us back to Himself. No wonder, then, that the people of God have always given priority to reading and hearing God’s Word in their worship.

Historical Background

In matters of church government and worship, the New Testament church followed the general pattern of the synagogue. The synagogue grew out of the Old Testament church and developed during the intertestamental period. In place of the immature worship of the temple system, it served as the transition to new covenant worship “in spirit and in truth.” The synagogue of the apostolic church discarded sacerdotalism’s visual crutches of sacrifices and symbolic ornamentation. Instead, through the synagogue’s systematic reading and exposition of God’s mercy and truth found in His inscripturated revelation, God’s people met in God’s presence, heard His Word for themselves, and returned the spiritual responses of prayer and praise.

The early church continued the synagogue practice of weekly Bible reading. Before printing presses and the widespread availability of Bibles, church leaders and pastors served as custodians of the Scriptures. When Roman persecutions came, these leaders would be singled out and commanded to turn over their holy writings. The persecutors believed that if they could rob the churches of their identity by removing the divine message, they could snuff out the church.
During the Reformation Martin Luther’s personal study of the Bible fired his imagination and led him to declare before the princes in the church and state that his conscience was “captive to the Word.” While on forced sabbatical, Luther’s consuming project was to translate this book into German so his people might experience its life-changing power.

Others like William Tyndale would die to make the Bible accessible to their people in their own tongue. Tyndale’s dying prayer at the stake was, “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes.” Within a generation, the English Bible was placed and read in English churches.

Seeing the Reformation impact of having ready access to God’s Word, the Westminster divines codified the principle of putting the Bible into the vernacular for use in the church and Christian homes:

But because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God who have right unto and interest in the Scripture, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner, and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope (Westminster Confession, 1:8).

The open reading of the Word is an essential part of worship. Its message shapes the rest of the worship service as well.

**Purpose of Scripture Reading in Worship**

We believe that the reading and hearing of God’s Word is a means of grace. When it is attended by the Spirit Who gave it, inscripturated truth has irresistible power to sanctify and build up its hearers in the faith. Hearing the Word is an essential part of God’s means of transforming us by the renewing of our minds so that we might know His will.² Note the Bible’s self-authentification:

Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.” (John 17:17)

God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel…” (2 Thess. 2:13,14)

If God sanctifies His people through their personal reading of the Bible, how much more should our attention be given in a public worship service where the congregation gathers to honor God and receive grace. Hence the Bible’s command to pastors in 1 Tim 4:13: “…give attention to [public] reading….” The original Greek word “reading” always means public, vocal reading.
Who Should Read in Congregational Worship?

The reading of the Word by God’s servant in the midst of the congregation is tantamount to God speaking to His people. But what makes the public reading of Scripture in worship more critically important than personal Bible reading at home is the biblical doctrine of the keys. Jesus gave the first pastors of the church, the apostles, the responsibility of pronouncing both God’s forgiveness and His judgment of sins. This is done whenever God’s gracious Word is read in public. Also, in cases of public discipline, the reading of relevant portions of Scripture must be done by His officials before the congregation.

Hence, the Westminster Directory of Public worship called for church officers to take responsibility for the reading of sacred Scripture in worship. A strict interpretation of the Westminster Directory that precludes spiritually mature men (non-officers) from occasionally reading in worship goes beyond the practice of the synagogue and apostolic church. There a visiting adult male could be invited to read the Scripture text and even offer brief remarks on it.3 

Women reading Scripture before the congregation4 is another matter. Neither the synagogue tradition followed by the apostolic church, nor the Reformed understanding of the office of the keys allows for women to read the Bible in public worship. Biblical Christianity recognizes Scripture’s injunctions that do not permit women to bear authority over the church (1 Cor. 14:34, 35; 1 Tim. 2:12). More than a didactic exercise, the public reading of God’s Word from the pulpit is an authoritative function of the church in worship. The reader stands in God’s place to declare God’s will to His people.

The apostle exhorted a pastor to give attention to the public reading of Scripture (1 Tim. 4:13); the same pastor was also exhorted to handle the Word authoritatively: “preach the word… reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2 Tim. 4:2).

Those that bear authority in the church have responsibility for proclaiming God’s Word in the church. While they might occasionally delegate the reading and exposition of the Scripture to other gifted men, they will not contravene the injunctions and patterns of Holy Writ to make a woman God’s spokesperson for the authoritative proclamation of the Word.

Care in Public Reading

Remembering the sacred source, content, and purpose of Scripture reading, those who read will want to give diligent care in how they deliver God’s Word. Reading the Bible is not like reading an insurance policy; a monotone voice will not do. It is not like reading a newspaper with detached interest. Rather, the intelligible revelation of God Who has condescended to communicate His thoughts to His world calls for reverent reading.

Scripture must be read with gravity to communicate its inherent dignity and with care to reflect its intended meaning.5

This, of course, requires familiarity with the text. Before reading in public, the text
should be read beforehand to ponder the shape and content of the original message. Good
communicators will give attention to the phrasing of the text. What are its units of thought?
How do they lead into the next thought? Are there places for dramatic pauses?

The literary form of the reading also will dictate the emotion and timbre of the voice.
Sadly, many public readers handle a narrative like Nathan confronting King David with the same
emotion and vocal rate as a genealogy in the book of Genesis.

Conclusion

The public reading of the Word in congregational worship is no less critical today than it
was in the early church.

Since the invention of the modern printing press in 1453, acclaimed by more than one
survey of scholars as the one development having the most impact on our millennium, the Bible
has become the most printed book of all time. Through the agency of Bible societies and mass
retailing, most western homes and North American motels contain Bibles. A majority of
believing Christians own and read their personal Bibles on a regular basis.

Despite the spiritual benefit and personal pleasure that this brings, access to personal
Bibles should not diminish the importance of the authoritative, public reading of God’s Word
when the saints are gathered. We should the rather “…give the more earnest heed to the things
we have heard, lest we let them slip” (Heb. 2:1-3). God forbid that His people ever become “dull
of hearing” (Heb. 5:11).

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1 James 2:2.
2 Romans 12:2.
4 See the Banner of Truth article on this subject, April 1999, 427:19.
5 Jer. 23:28—“And he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully.” Neh. 8:8—“So they read distinctly
   from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.”