

A Pastor's Perspective — On Reading the Bible Publically

“Power of Public Reading of Scripture” by Timothy Sprankle

When Jesus read from Isaiah 61 in his hometown, I can imagine the pregnant silence as he rolled up the scroll. It was Sabbath, and news of the local carpenter-turned-teacher preceded him. He strode to the front of the synagogue and received the parchment. He uncurled it, found his spot and began. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...”

Jesus read but a few verses before tucking the scroll away. The audience awaited another word or an explanation. Jesus simply states: “Today, this has been fulfilled in your presence.”

Perhaps no further explanation was needed. In an oral culture, public reading of Scripture stood alone as an aspect of worship. Reading was more performance than private discipline. The word of God was given voice by trained readers and synagogue leaders.

The printing press and mass production changed our way of Scripture intake. Public reading of Scripture lost some of its import. In the post-Enlightenment era, Scripture reading complements the sermon; rarely does it stand-alone.

While this may not be true of every branch of Christianity, in my non-liturgical brand Scripture tends toward bite-sized, privatized, sermon-specific readings. Not only does this betray a subtle and ironic understanding of Scripture's authority, it also ignores a timeless corporate discipline that has united God's people since Sinai (Moses, Exod. 24; Josiah, 2 Chron. 34; Ezra, Neh. 8; Jesus, Luke 4).

Hence, when Paul implored Timothy to “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture” (1 Tim. 4:13) he drew from an established pattern of making God's word audible. Paul included teaching and dialogue in his treatment of the biblical text (e.g., Acts 17:2), but he surely let public reading stand on its own.

With Paul as my inspiration, I recently experienced the benefits of public reading during sermon series in his letters (Galatians through Philemon). At the outset of each message, I read the apostle's entire letter to the congregation, abandoning the bite-sized, privatized method of Bible reading.

The exercise proved fruitful. The more extensive public readings gave people a **better sense of the letter's tone and content**. They were able to feel the **main thrust and recurring themes**, rather than get lost in minor details. And the reading provided a **shared experience** of the God's word – akin to a sermon or corporate singing, but centered entirely on the Bible.

Moreover, consuming large portions of Paul helped subvert three fears related to reading Scripture in a worship service. While I feared **boredom**, I found that reading larger texts (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount; Colossians 1-2) gave me a chance for expressive delivery. A boring reader will incite boredom. But a dramatic reader will excite understanding.

I assumed longer readings would invite **more distractions**. Not a Sunday morning service passes without babies crying, cell phones beeping, people stirring, Bibles falling, and, perhaps, someone snoring. While the mind will wander during two full chapters of Philippians (as it does in the shorter texts), the extensive reading gives folks a chance to catch up and glean big ideas.

Finally, I worried longer readings would **steal from the sermon**. In fact, they did. I had to reduce *my* words to make space for *God's*. This was a version of robbing the pastor to pay tribute to Paul. And in the end, everyone was richer for it.

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