

Should We Still be Devoted to the Public Reading of Scripture?

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Is the Bible read much at your church's meetings? Should it be?



At the beginning of 1 Timothy 4, Paul says the false teachers in Ephesus were “devoting themselves to . . . teachings of demons” (v. 1). Later in the chapter, he charges Timothy: “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.” Timothy was to “devote” (same word as 4:1) himself to a Bible reading ministry out of which would come exhortations and teaching (not every time the Scriptures were read in the meetings, but regularly). Why was this so strategic for his ministry in Ephesus? The answers to this question will reveal to us a few benefits of the public reading of Scripture for our churches.

First, the public reading of Scripture demonstrated the priority and authority of the Bible.

When Timothy gathered with believers, he was to be about one thing — the Bible. It might have seemed as if the false teachers were focused on the Bible because, after all, they read from the Old Testament law, including (and maybe especially) the genealogies (1:3-4, 6-7). But that was it. They were soon off on their rants and telling of far-fetched stories that were distant from the Scriptures and lacked any kind of authoritative appeal clearly derived from the Bible.

Timothy, on the other hand, would have read not only the Old Testament, but any apostolic writings he could get his hands on! His commitment to the public reading of Scripture told his listeners that there is a voice that must be heard and obeyed above all — God's — and that *all* of what he says is “profitable” (2 Timothy 3:16).

Nothing has changed today. Reading even at length from all over the Bible with care says to those listening, “We *must* hear from God, and reading his word is the fundamental way to do that.” And when exhortation or teaching does follow the reading of Scripture, the speaker is communicating to his listeners, “What I am about to say is based on what this book says. I am just a messenger of the Lord, communicating ‘as one who speaks the oracles of God’ (1 Peter 4:11).” The teacher might even read the passage multiple times to emphasize that point.

Second, the public reading of Scripture protected against heresy and promoted unity in the truth.

Timothy's devotion to the public reading of Scripture, along with exhortations and teachings, was a way to confront the unorthodox views of the false teachers and preserve the unity of God's people in the truth in the face of those grace-denying heretics. This does not imply that Timothy would have avoided reading the law. He just would not have stayed there. The storyline of Scripture finds its fulfillment in Christ, and Timothy would have made sure the believers knew the redemptive trajectory of the Bible and were equipped to keep believing and proclaiming the gospel of grace.

We should be equally devoted to the public reading of Scripture in order to guard ourselves from false teaching and to be strengthened in the grace of our Lord Jesus. False teachers still physically show up in our churches; some even arise from within. And today we face additional platforms for heresy like television and the internet, bringing false teaching into the lives of God's people. The consequences can be devastating and eternal. If we are going to persevere, we need *more* Scripture coming into our minds and hearts.

Third, people who could not read and/or did not have much access to God's word were blessed by the public reading of Scripture.

Access to Scripture was limited in Ephesus, and illiteracy was common. These were two reasons why it was imperative to read the Bible publicly, and what a blessing it was for those listening!

You might argue that today, in your English-speaking context, literacy is the norm and Bibles are ubiquitous, so there really is no need to emphasize the public reading of Scripture. However, it is worth it even if a small minority cannot read. Besides, what is not to like about more Scripture? Also, illiteracy and the rarity of copies of the Bible are not the only reasons to be devoted to this practice — see the first two reasons given above.

Answers?

I will ask again: is the Bible read much at your church's meetings. Only you can answer that. Should the Bible be read much at your church's meetings? I hope you know the answer.